

Wayfaring Voices

Discursions into Black Vocal Style in a Norwegian Context

Ane Carmen Stuve Roggen

Master Thesis

Department of Musicology

University of Oslo

Fall Semester 2008

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to express my gratitude towards my supervisor, Stan Hawkins, for generously providing the most precise and perceptive guidance, and for encouraging me throughout the writing process. Other staff and students have offered valuable advice and good help along the way – thank you! Many thanks also to Gro Skorpen for useful comments which have helped both my English and my argument.

I would also like to thank my family for always being there. And most of all, thank you, Ole-Martin Ihle, for sharing so much of your knowledge with me, for being patient, and for challenging me to become a little bolder.

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1: Introduction

Background, subjective positioning, and hypothesis

Prologue: Wayfaring voices

“She was ad-libbing like she thought she was black or something. It was a little embarrassing...” My fellow students at the Musicology department were sitting in the cafeteria, discussing last night’s soul club happening downtown where some of them had gone to listen, dance, or perform with the band. I was eavesdropping; having recently started my research for this project I took special notice each time a conversation encircled my topic of investigation. I was struck by how often I came across relevant discussions. When white voices venture into the stylistic spheres of African-Americans, other voices are often raised. Some are skeptical, others are impressed; but the general level of confusion and involvement I have witnessed and overheard in formal and informal forums¹ suggests that we are not quite done debating the questions of “blackness”, “whiteness” and cultural appropriation in popular music. On the contrary, this field remains immensely charged, and along with American popular music itself it has spread far beyond the American borders. It seemed to me that I was listening to an untidy choir of subjective voices which kept repeating and rephrasing a worn chorus from the history of popular music, simultaneously spelling out and contesting the absurdities of ‘race’ as a musical determinant.

My wish to interrogate into notions of “black vocal style in a Norwegian context” has been sparked not only by the impression that such notions are at play when Norwegians make sense of popular music, but also by my own practice as a singer. Growing up in Oslo the 1980s and 90s I was, like many other girls my age, exposed to American popular music and to the grand voices of soul. My vocal practice was perhaps shaped as much by this as by the classical training I received later, and operating in both rhythmical and classical genres I have always been very aware that different aesthetic “rules” apply in different vocal style regimes. In the case of classical music vs. rhythmic genres, the existence of separate ideals goes without saying. But the impression that there are ways of shaping timbre and phrases which

¹ One should get a good impression of the type of informal disputes I am referring to by visiting online debates and blog entries such as “Does Joss Stone sound too black?” (Marchese 2007) or “Should white people make black music?” (van Kerckhove 2007), or the “talk page” linked to the Wikipedia entry “Blue-Eyed Soul” (Wikipedia “Talk: Blue-eyed soul”).

are often perceived as “hands-off” to white vocalists who want to “be taken seriously” as singer-songwriters, jazz singers, or rock vocalists, puzzled me for a long time.

After spending a period studying music and anthropology in the United States, I became aware of the large body of literature within the fields of cultural studies and African-American studies in particular, concerned with questions of black style, black culture, and black history, and addressing the problem of white appropriation of black expressive forms and cultural signifiers. I was surprised by the outspokenness about race, not only in politics and academic research but in everyday life and popular culture. The efforts of whites to play with blackness, and blacks to play with whiteness (in all the different ways one can imagine) is a recirculating source of material and meaning, and has always been a central theme in American cultural production. Questions of ethnicity, skin-color and cultural differences are obviously articulated very differently in a Norwegian general public. However, in the sphere of popular music, Norway arguably finds its place in the outskirts of an American cultural sphere. Perhaps, then, some of the debates on black style may offer relevant perspectives for a study carried out within a Norwegian context? And perhaps a provincial and relatively homogenous context such as the Norwegian might provide us with new insights in the dynamics of race and authenticity in popular music?

Hypothesis and research enquiries

Observing how the notions of ‘race’ and cultural appropriation still feed into subjective and public discourse on popular music, and how they ostensibly carry relevance for Norwegian musical practices, a great number of questions emerge:

- How, and why, are notions of blackness and whiteness put into play as people make sense of popular music, and vocal style in particular? How should one understand this concept of ‘blackness’ – is it infinitely dynamic and shifting, or may one identify certain popular ways of employing it? What sounds ‘black’ to whom?
- May the notion of ‘blackness in music’ be isolated and treated solely with regard to stylistic features and genre, or will connections always be established between ethnic origin, cultural heritage, and “essentially” black expressions? Is there any way to avoid essentialization as one addresses the concept of ‘blackness’?
- Can an investigation of the notions of a ‘black’ stylistic expression tell us something about how musical style produces and articulates social significance?

- How is the notion of “a white person” singing in “a black manner” perceived in a Norwegian context², as opposed to in an American context? Can we identify differences in how the questions of ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’ are addressed in our respective language practices? Can a scrutiny of these questions within a Norwegian cultural context reveal social and aesthetic norms in Norwegian culture, and thereby help us outline this context?
- How are issues of authenticity in popular music related to assumptions around the racialized body, and how does *the voice* as an authentication device play into these politics?

These questions generate a wealth of other questions. How does one activate such a field of enquiry? Rather than reducing it down to a testable hypothesis, I wish to make an explorative journey, a *discursion* which “runs about”³ into the landscape of these questions, like a “wayfaring voice” or a travelogue reporter. Along the way, as I pose my questions and interpret the statements I find expressed in my data, I, too, enter in the choir and contribute to the extended conversation about notions of “black vocal style in a Norwegian context”.

The concepts of ‘conversation’ and ‘discourse’ acknowledge the interrelational nature of knowledge and the socially constructive nature of language, in a way that has considerable relevance within the field of popular music studies, and which ultimately seeks to defy mechanisms of essentialization. By embracing these concepts, I also wish to describe the process of voicing an argument as an *interpretive* and *explorative* practice. In doing so, I position my musicological research theoretically close to hermeneutical and post-modern philosophies. During the course of the following pages I intend to elucidate this theoretical orientation further. First, however, I will start with a few necessary clarifications.

Clarifying “black vocal style”

Undeniably my title has some problematic aspects, and what inevitably sets alarm bells ringing is my employment of the term ‘black’. When I write ‘black’, I do not mean to refer to any static, solid, objective, essential, or unambiguous blackness. On the contrary, the main intention of this thesis is to challenge any assumption that “blackness” can be reified. My

² See problematization of “a Norwegian context” below.

³ **Discourse:** c.1374, alteration of Latin *discursus* “a running about,” in Late Latin “conversation,” from stem of *discurrere* “run about,” from *dis-* “apart” + *currere* “to run.” Sense of “formal speech or writing” is first recorded 1581” (Online Etymology Dictionary).

objective is to analyze and expose multiple *notions* of blackness and attempt to show how these may take the form of different assumptions regarding musical expressivity and style as well as social properties. It is difficult to distinguish clearly between the term 'black' as linguistic unit, as referring to a stylistic quality, as a body of stereotyped assumptions, as a social category, or as a skin-color: It lies in the nature of the concept that it has an enormous semantic range and fluidity (and indeed, the common practice of essentializing blackness testifies to this flexibility). If one of my informants refers to blackness in vocal style, I am not always able to establish to what degree he is projecting notions of black "essence" onto a stylistic practice common to African-Americans. Therefore I will generally write the word straightforward without capitalizing it, and try to make it clear what I mean by it in those cases where there is reason for confusion.

Surely there are those who feel that the concept of blackness is better left alone: what good has come from the American obsession with 'race', and why should we consciously project it onto our local practices? My answer to this objection is that, whether we approve or not, notions of blackness have some relevance in the field of Norwegian popular music. My data show that the concept is sometimes explicitly invoked. One can also assume that notions of blackness often (albeit implicitly) assume the position of an Other and thus play a significant role in bringing out Norwegian subjectivities. Notions of blackness also seem to be a source of identification for Norwegians of several ethnic backgrounds.

I have stated that I will inquire not only into "blackness" but into "black vocal style". In one sense, this narrows down my area of research, from black style in general to a more specific focus on vocal practices. However, this really implies that I must inquire into perspectives on "black style" *as well as* perspectives on "vocal style" and in effect this expands the range of my discursion: The theme of *the voice* inevitably opens up complicated problems related to the body, identity issues, authenticity discourses, and communication – all of which hold great relevance to questions of cultural appropriation.

One final clarification: due to the fact that I am situated within the field of popular music studies and make frequent references to North-American popular culture, I will generally use the term 'black' the way I perceive it to be employed in American vernacular practices. In other words, the term 'black' will in most cases be interchangeable with 'African-American'. Both of these terms, however, comprise several and different references. When applied in contemporary academic discourse, they often rely on a notion of diaspora⁴.

⁴ The concept of diaspora refers to a population of common ethnic origin who have left (or been forced to leave) their original territory and been scattered to distant areas, where their cultural development have assumed

While the above is an insufficient definition, it will not be standing alone: I will devote much of my exploration to excavating other, local and subjective ways of employing the term ‘black’.

Clarifying “a Norwegian context”

Another “Pandora’s box” to be opened up by my thesis’ title is the reference to “a Norwegian context”. While I am aware that it is nearly impossible to substantiate this concept, I will attempt to clarify what I mean by the term, and explain why I choose to make such a claim.

One of my objectives is to communicate that I will consider how the problem of “white appropriation of black style” may manifest itself outside the immediate American cultural sphere. It would certainly be easier to say that I investigate “*Norwegian* singers who are influenced by black vocal traditions”, but this would be incorrect. Such a phenomenon has, however, been one of the topics discussed in my interviews and focus group conversation. My title’s reference to a “Norwegian context” rather addresses the fact that I have done interviews and gathered most of my data from Norwegian sources; that I discuss Norwegian language contexts and refer to some Norwegian public debates; that I make use of generalizations regarding typical features of “Norwegian” culture and social manners (drawing on existing research) and allow it to influence my own analyses; and that I discuss Norwegian musical performances which may be said to signify on notions of black style⁵.

Having said this, a crucial clarification lies ahead: Such a study cannot claim to be generalizable or representative of “Norwegian’s” discursive practices surrounding notions of black style. This study is but only one analytical approach to the problem, which looks at discursive practices within a Norwegian context from a few angles. Hopefully this will offer some new perspectives on the current debates surrounding the politics of style, blackness and social identity – keeping in mind that context can never be reified or “frozen” into a static entity (Holstein and Gubrium 2004:309). Context is “emergent, variable, and highly elastic. Of course, it must be stopped in its tracks momentarily to allow for description and analysis” (ibid.).

different courses. The concept was first used with reference to Jews exiled from Israel (Wikipedia: “Diaspora”/unknown author 2008). Within the field of PMS, the term has been most efficiently theorized by Paul Gilroy who explores “the fundamental dislocation of black culture” (1993:80) by help of his concept of “the Black Atlantic”.

⁵ Let me underscore that I do not intend to imply that the singers analyzed in chapter 5 are engaging in “white appropriation of black style” as this is normally understood. With regard to the performances, I wish to suggest a much subtler dynamic of stylistic reference. Most importantly, I open for the possibility that any reference to “black style” is located in the creative interpretation and/or the public reception of the performances in question.

By highlighting the concept of context in my title, I also wish to acknowledge the critical position of context in any study that is discursively oriented. The importance of context permeates my argument throughout the thesis. Importantly, as Holstein and Gubrium (2004:308) remind us, context cannot be singularly defined: “qualitative researchers must be careful about the analytic and empirical horizons that they open up under the rubric of context. (...) there isn’t a lone, immutable realm of circumstances that might confidently be called *the* context of any particular action or interaction”. For my own work, this is a highly relevant point. Any observations I make will be influenced by a number of intersecting contexts – both local and broad, historical and current. The exchange between American and Norwegian cultural contexts in popular music is complex, and this is one of the problems which have made this such an intriguing project to work on. Placing a phenomenon within a context is a matter of judgment, and doing it well relies on intimate knowledge of the field as well as a solid empirical basis. The present study is of a modest format, and I have had to content myself with getting a little closer to a few constituents of the contexts I refer to. Fortunately I have the opportunity to draw on other studies that shed light on musical practices within a Norwegian context, such as Skårberg (2003), Hawkins (2007), and Vestel (2003).

Theoretical orientation

Interdisciplinary influences from Popular Music Studies

Fortunately, I have the opportunity to draw on a rich array of excellent research within the field of Popular Music Studies (PMS) providing perspectives on questions of race, authenticity, vocal style, musical meaning, the embodied musical experience, the performance of subjectivities, and the constitution of racialized bodies. Different problems call for different contributions from the field of PMS, and I will allow myself to refer not only to musicologists, but also anthropologists and sociologists within the field of cultural studies.

My argument will begin by visiting some of the most influential works on black style and identity. Among the researchers, based within different disciplines, whose contributions to this field cannot be bypassed (although some will only be mentioned briefly) are Olly Wilson, Henry Louis Gates, Tricia Rose, Christopher Small, Portia Maultsby, Samuel A. Floyd, Marc Anthony Neal, Robin D.G. Kelley, Philip Tagg, Sterling Stuckey, Geneva

Smitherman, David Brackett, Stan Hawkins, and Paul Gilroy. Among the Norwegian contributions to this area I would like to mention Odd Skårberg, Jan Sverre Knudsen, and Anne Danielsen. My approaches to *the voice* take on board the work of Simon Frith as well as Roland Barthes; Stephen Field's work has informed my understanding of *style*, and in general, my musicological analyses and perspectives rely crucially on Richard Middleton, Susan McClary, and Robert Walser – either in the sense that I apply their work explicitly in my analyses or in the sense that my ways of dealing with musical texts and meanings have been fundamentally shaped by their work. Rather than giving here a detailed account of the central tenets articulated by each of these researchers, I will return to them in the course of my thesis.

Among my theoretical influences from outside the “strictly” musicological realm, are also critical and post-colonial studies that deal with musical appropriation; I will discuss cultural hierarchies and notions of legitimacy by means of a Bourdieuan terminology; and I will draw on cultural analyses which treat stylistic details as articulations and (partly motivated) signs of larger cultural systems. No doubt such a theoretical and methodological spread may weaken the efficacy of an academic piece of work. However, it may at times be an advantage to triangulate one's object of study, and the field of PMS is characterized by a conspicuous eclecticism. Researchers within the field are quite liberal in their practice of integrating the theories and methods which most adequately contribute to an understanding of the problem under investigation.

For my own purposes, it has been important to follow the lead of my study object, which is multi-faceted by nature. My research, in this sense, holds a quite empirical profile. There are still some underlying theoretical assumptions that affect how I deal with my empirical data and how I handle my analyses. In the following paragraphs I will provide some observations around these.

Discursions into popular music

My title refers to the concept of ‘discourse’, announcing that I will make ‘discursions’ into notions of black style in a Norwegian context. This concept holds a central position in current philosophic perspectives on language as socially constructive⁶. Still, the concept of discourse

⁶ There is a rich array of contemporary research traditions that focus on language-in-use, influenced by theories emerging from sources such as socio-linguistics, pragmatics, phenomenology, deconstructionism, and post-structuralism (Rapley 2007:4-5; Wodak 2004:197). Though each tradition has its own terminology and assumptions about what counts as ‘appropriate data’ (Rapley 2007:5), they can all be related to social constructionism in the sense that the “concept of knowledge as a mirror of reality is replaced by a notion of

is highly ambiguous. It is used differently by different researchers, and different academic cultures have their own traditions and ways of applying the term (Wodak 2004:198). It therefore seems necessary to give a short introduction to the term, and to clarify how I will use it.

The entry from an etymological dictionary (quoted in a footnote above) shows how the word ‘discourse’ can be traced back to “a running about”. Although I allow myself to allude to this metaphor for rhetorical reasons, current practices of applying the term mainly gather their meanings from the late Latin denotation of ‘conversation’⁷. In the social sciences and humanities, the concept of discourse relies on a view of language as performative⁸ and socially constitutive. Beyond this general assumption, the fields of discourse analysis (DA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) do not provide one specific theory or methodology as the approach is interdisciplinary and eclectic (Wodak 2004:198-200). Still, I will attempt to outline two broad orientations⁹ within the general field:

Influenced by Foucault¹⁰, the term ‘discourse’ is often used as a shorthand for “discursive formation”, i.e. an “institutionalized way of thinking”. If I were to adhere to this tradition, I might say that I had identified two discourses in my interviews around black vocal style (such as the discourses of racism or nationalism)¹¹. I would also make a distinction between a ‘text’ and a ‘discourse’ as is the custom in the German and Central European tradition (Wodak 2004:198). Another way of understanding the term “discourse” is as a concept that “constructs language as active: texts and talk in social practice” (Hepburn and Potter 2004:180). Addressing discourse as language use in speech and writing, and referring to both written and oral texts as discourse, this orientation is more solidly based in the English-speaking world (Wodak 2004:198).

‘social construction of reality’ (Berger & Luckmann 1972), which focuses on interpretation and negotiation of meaning in the social world” (Kvale 1997:52, my translation).

⁷ In linguistics, the term refers to any unit of connected speech or writing composed of more than one sentence such as conversations, arguments, or speeches, and it also seems that this understanding of the term has influenced common, informal ways of using the word.

⁸ The concept of performativity is related to speech act theory and pragmatic linguistics, assuming that a verbal utterance in itself can constitute a social act. Judith Butler’s more Foucaultian reading of the concept challenges essentialist views of (particularly gendered) identity, highlighting the interrelated nature of performance, discourse and identity formation (Loxley 2007).

⁹ Hepburn and Potter (2004) suggest a division of the field into two broad orientations. For the sake of simplicity I have attempted to synthesize their outline with Rapley’s (2007) and Wodak’s (2004) accounts, using my best judgement.

¹⁰ Due to the limited space I will not focus on Foucault’s theories in my thesis. I consider his work to be so well established that I can allow myself to make only a brief mention of it, given that I do not build my argument on any assumptions which rely on an account of his work.

¹¹ See Rapley 2007:2

In my dealings with discourse I most often depart from the latter of these two orientations. Inclined to refer to social events, musical performances, and oral statements as discourses or texts, I prefer to use the terms ‘text’ and ‘discourse’ interchangeably, but always in the sense that texts draw their meanings from other texts and from the contexts which surround them. However, my indebtedness to the field of discourse analysis is not primarily expressed through frequent mentions of the term. Rather it forms an implicit fundament for my research as I presuppose that all interpretation is historically conditioned, and that the act of reading and interpreting is no less an act of meaning production than the act of writing.

I also acknowledge the presence of larger “discourses” (or discursive formations) in the statements and texts included in my research, but mostly I leave this implicit. Indeed, it seems problematic to effectively separate, or “choose between”, the two approaches to the term described above: engaging with the former depends on the latter, and engaging with the latter does not exclude the former.

In what way, then, is the concept of discourse relevant to my work within the field of PMS? It should be clear that by indicating that I will make “discursions” into notions of black style, I have not professed allegiance to any particular single theory or methodology¹². Instead, I have wanted to create a theoretical and methodological room which is as wide and high-ceilinged as possible, in order to operate freely as I pursue the questions which present themselves along the way. The interdisciplinary nature of the field of PMS allows for such an openness.

What I *have* done by referring to my procedure as “discursions” is to indicate a certain epistemological and ontological positioning within the field of PMS; a certain way of considering realities and meanings in music. The concept of discourse acknowledges that we understand and produce our identities and surroundings by means of the structures, categories, and concepts which constitute a language. In a similar sense, a discursive approach to music acknowledges that musical meaning is intimately connected to the language with which we produce our life-worlds. Seeing music as a discourse also implies seeing it as a hyper-text; a text which gathers its meanings from its relation to other texts, be they other pieces of music, social events, commonplace ideas, words, categories, broader explanatory systems, etc (see also Hepburn and Potter 2004:185): While accepting the notion that a musical event can never be separated from the contexts which surround it, one acknowledges how contexts and co-texts play into the musical text, rather than approaching the musical event as a vehicle or

¹² I have not even announced that I will perform a “discourse analysis” because this, despite the wide array of research practices available within this category, might place certain theoretical constraints upon my argument.

result of social processes¹³. And it implies seeing music as socially *constructive*: as a mode of reality construction, a tool with which we produce our phenomenological experience of being in the world. On this fundament I hope to explore how categories such as blackness and whiteness (or “Norwegianness”), and the transgression of these, may influence how musical performances are experienced and interpreted, and how musical identities are shaped.

Methodological concerns

By referring to my investigations as discursions I also wish to indicate a certain methodological orientation in my musical analyses, following the majority of current researchers within the field of PMS, such as Middleton, Walser, and McClary. Entering in an interpretive conversation with the musical texts and their contexts, I take a discursively oriented hermeneutic approach where I reproduce the music by means of the creative act of writing. Musical texts, of course, are not the only discourses I explore in my thesis. My main objects of research are notions of black vocal style – and popular notions are constructed and reproduced as people talk about music.

Choice of method: focus group research and qualitative interviews

Qualitative methods are becoming increasingly important, not only in the humanities but also in social science as current philosophical tendencies emphasize themes such as experience, meaning, life-world, conversation, dialogue, stories, and language (Kvale 1997:24, my translation¹⁴). In an account of the practice of *focus group research*, Macnaghten and Myers (2004) observe the same phenomenon when they assert that the rapid spread of this method seen in recent social science research “corresponds to a new interest, in many social science fields, in shared and tacit beliefs, and in the way these beliefs emerge in interaction with others in a local setting” (65).

For my own purposes, which were to explore popular attitudes and often implicit notions of a concept as problematic, diffuse and ideologically charged as *vocal blackness* within the unstable and elusive frame which I have called *a Norwegian context* – I found that qualitative methods were generally adequate, and that focus group research was a particularly good way to start generating an archive. Macnaghten and Myers propose that “focus groups (...) are likely to reveal complex, contradictory and shifting definitions, and different senses

¹³ As would be typical in the more sociologically oriented practice of cultural studies.

¹⁴ All citations from Kvale have here been translated by me.

of agency” (2004:65). They go on to explain that “focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives – but don’t” (ibid.). The dynamic space of the focus group conversation made it possible for me to address a topic without being exactly sure what this topic consisted of – and my purposeful sampling of members to the group contributed to this end.

In addition to the focus group conversation I made a few additional interviews. Due to the limitations of space I will not go into detail on the methodological procedures related to qualitative interviews, but my reflections on the central concerns and challenges of focus group research will in most cases be applicable for interviews as well.

Sampling, composition, and my relation to the informants

Focus group research is a diverse and innovative field, and a generally agreed code of “good practice” is difficult to establish. One can only be reflexive about the choices one makes (Macnaghten and Myers 2004:66). Two main challenges, both of which concern the sampling and composition of the focus group participants, are related to the generalizability of any findings, and to the relation of the researcher to the subjects. Macnaghten and Myers point out that “Focus group researchers do not aim for a representative sample of a population; they try to generate talk that will extend the range of our thinking about an issue, and to do that they recruit groups that are defined in relation to the particular conceptual framework of a study (...)” (68).

For my focus group, I selected four vocal students from the Norwegian Academy of Music: Oda, Kathrine, Mari, and Morten. The three women and one man were all in their twenties, and they knew one another quite well as friends and colleagues. Macnaghten and Myers report that focus groups work better “with participants who have well-established routines for talking to each other (69) and explain how it is “difficult in the best of circumstances to get a group of strangers to bring out in talk just those assumptions and tensions that they usually leave implicit (...)” (ibid.). In this respect, the composition of the group worked very well for my ends: Although the subjects did not appear to have discussed notions of black vocal style previously, they shared enough common ground as singers to be able to communicate well, and in the course of our session they became very outspoken and eager to discuss the topics I presented. Kvale (1997:108) recommends the qualitative researcher to interview “as many subjects as is necessary in order to find out what you need to know”, and my focus group provided me with a wealth of interesting and varied material.

Despite the subjects' different life stories, however, my focus group inevitably constituted quite a homogenous sample. In order to get more breadth into my data archive, I conducted a group interview with three female vocal students whom I had never met before, from the Christian college (previously bible school) of Staffeldtsgate: Kaja, Silje, and Gunnhild. This college arguably holds a musical profile quite different from that of the Norwegian Academy of Music, and without having studied the details of their curriculum I assumed this "musician's education" to be mainly based in gospel and popular music. I was therefore interested to see if different perspectives on vocal style and the concept of blackness would arise. Although this interview did not provide me with a lot of new material¹⁵, some statements from the session will be presented. I also conducted one in-depth interview with a band musician, Øystein, who was an acquaintance of mine. We had never before had a private conversation; he was a friend of a friend, but I knew him to address notions of "blackness" in music quite frequently.

As to my own relation to the subjects in the focus group, I knew one of them well both personally and professionally; two of them were loose acquaintances, and the last member I had never met before (she was recruited by one of the other members). I did not know them well enough to be able to anticipate what stories and ideas they would offer. However, my quite intimate knowledge of their professional and social "home base" of music studies in Oslo provided me with "a certain level of member's knowledge or, as Lynch (1993) calls it, 'vulgar competence'", of the language and the routines of my research site (Rapley 2007:104). The subjects had varying degrees of experience with traditionally black genres, but as performers and students they were all situated somewhere in the cross-section between popular genres and jazz (or classical music in the case of one of them). I will return to describing the informants' respective backgrounds and orientations in chapters 3 and 5.

Location and facilitation of the focus group conversation

As the location for the focus group conversation, I chose to invite the members into my living room. This is not a "neutral" ground, but as Macnaghten and Myers (2004:67) point out there is no such thing as a "neutral" setting, and each setting has its advantages and disadvantages. My own home hopefully provided a relaxing atmosphere, and this setting did not attempt to conceal that I had invited the informants to enter into a project whose limits were defined by me.

¹⁵ I conducted this interview as a follow-up on the focus group conversation, and the session remained mostly centered around general statements which I find little need to repeat.

I also caught myself taking advantage of the location in another way: Fearing that it would be difficult to encourage the informants to approach openly the subject of “black style”, which is often perceived as a problematic and sensitive topic, I directed their attention to my bookshelf and all its American titles referring to “black style” and “blackness”. This allowed me to legitimize my asking them to engage with similar problems. After I had launched some opening questions with the intention of sparking their interest and creating a space where it was easy to address the topic, the participants volunteered to narrate their own personal histories of engaging with “black” vocal style¹⁶, and the conversation could begin.

“...focus group moderators may be more or less interventionist; they may also have more or less empathy with a particular group, may be more or less identifiable by them as one of theirs, and may contribute more or less of their own personal narratives in the discussion” (ibid.:71). I was in fact encouraged by the group to contribute with some of my own perspectives, but mostly I allowed the conversation to flow between the participants for nearly three hours. With a loose topic guide¹⁷ I facilitated the conversation by occasionally directing the discussion onto another path or presenting some follow-up questions to single statements. The full session was recorded, and I made some additional notes where I found something particularly noticeable or where body language seemed relevant.¹⁸

Transcription, analysis, interpretation, application, and ethical concerns

There are many techniques of transcribing audio materials¹⁹– I have employed a basic verbatim transcript (see Rapley 2007:52) which indicates some pauses, laughter, emphasis, etc.²⁰ After transcribing the focus group conversation at length, I started analyzing the material: reading it over and over guided by my fresh memory and notes from the session, and

¹⁶ As may appear from the citations used in chapters 3-5, some of the informants already seemed to be quite accustomed to conceptualizing certain vocal stylistic elements and performances as “black”.

¹⁷ Which I kept to myself; I did not use boards, cards or pictures, but played one musical example.

¹⁸ In general I limited my attention to verbal statements as well as observing manifestations of group norms (as expressed in reactions, interaction and the flow of the conversation), but I made particular note of body language in the case where one of the participants performed a song. This situation is described in more detail in the introduction of Chapter 5.

¹⁹ Some methods feature a high degree of attentiveness towards non-verbal elements of communication and interaction, such as the Jeffersonian codes of overlapping speech, length of pauses, stress of syllables etc. (Rapley 2007:49-71). “But it is not simply a matter of the more detail, the better; using a transcript that is more detailed than one needs is like giving a few unnecessary decimal places on one’s statistics” Macnaghten and Myers assert (2004:74). For my own purposes, a basic verbatim transcript conveyed as much information as I needed (and was able to handle).

²⁰ Most of these non-verbal elements have been removed in the statements quoted in the thesis for readability reasons, and some of the statements have been condensed or “cleaned up” (literal repetitions removed, grammatical irregularities corrected where this does not alter the meaning of the statement, etc).

beginning the work of highlighting key passages and selecting quotable themes. Inevitably, this analytic process was influenced by my expectations and preliminary assumptions: “analysis, in the sense of ‘producing knowledge’ about a specific body of material, is an inherently ongoing accomplishment” (Rapley 2007:127). At no point as I was planning, designing, performing, or analysing my research, was I able to deal with the material without being affected by my own ideas and opinions. However, the process of reading, selecting, and reproducing the interview material as written discourse, was in itself an important stage in the process of articulating the focal concerns of my thesis.

All the subjects’ statements, as well as numerous newspaper clippings, have been translated to English²¹, and inevitably some nuances have been lost in this process. Considering that my exploration largely focuses on the subtleties of language and on the difference between Norwegian and American language contexts, this represents a potential problem. Where it seems necessary, I have therefore left the original term in parenthesis.

For Phil Macnaghten, “focus groups are microcosms that can stand for wider discussions, *real or potential*, just as these participants can stand for wider groups” (2004:75, italics added). This may seem like a problematic assumption. When passages from qualitative research methods are reprinted in an academic piece of work, there is always a danger of falsely indicating that the statements are generalizable in a way which they often are not. However, the word ‘potential’ here provides a key to seeing how the statements from a focus group interview may be applicable outside the social context of the interview: The informant’s articulations may function as door-openers to new aspects of the problem under investigation. Analyzing my interview material, I was therefore minded to select material which could have such a function of communicating interesting dilemmas; carrying traces of broader discourses. Some contradictions and discrepancies in the material are tentatively brought out, but if representativity and generalizability were criteria of my sampling, I should have been even more determined to bring out as many different voices as possible, and to test certain assertions by searching for deviant cases. What I hope to do is rather to open up as many and as relevant aspects of “notions of black vocal style in a Norwegian setting” as the format of the master’s thesis allows me to.

Kvale (1997:207) describes how hermeneutic and post-modern modes of understanding allow for a *legitimate multitude* of interpretations, and calls it a strength that the interviewer is co-writer and co-producer of the resulting text (221). He establishes²²

²¹ This applies for the whole thesis; I will not repeat “my translation” on every occasion.

²² Drawing on Lather (1995)

different possible approaches to a text, such as the *critical* (what is often referred to as the “hermeneutics of suspicion”) and the *deconstructive* reading “which multiplies, destabilizes, and denaturalizes, as expression of unconscious tacit and unarticulated assumptions, and which makes use of artistic and literary practice and erases the divide between fact and fiction” (Kvale 1997:222). My interpretations do not rely on a *critical* reading, and my argument is not produced from an outspoken political or ideological position. I sometimes, however, take a somewhat *deconstructive* approach and point to tacit or latent implications suggested in the statements. There are some ethical considerations connected to such a treatment of recorded speech: While I have taken pains to present the statements themselves in their pertinent verbal context and expose my own interpretations as such, the statements are nevertheless reduced to text and recontextualized within the framework of my discursive exploration.

I have made anonymous all of my informants by giving them fictive names. Not all asked for this explicitly, but I prefer it this way due to the generally problematic nature of the object under discussion. Saying that one is exploring the significations of a concept like blackness often produces an initial skepticism in people who are not familiar with the nature of this particular argument, and who thus may fear that the project aims to reproduce racist or essentialist assumptions.

Presenting data and subject position: avoiding neutral authority

In addition to the interview data, my data archive consists of written documents such as newspaper articles and music reviews, entries from weblogs (blogs), debates and articles from online magazines, as well as academic publications and unpublished research such as master’s theses. Observations from “the field” in concerts and festivals will be described and musical audio/video material analyzed. I also refer to “naturally occurring data” or data generated in an unsystematic manner, such as informal conversations I have had. Thus, the distinction between my position as researcher and my position as subjective participant in my field of research will often not be clear. I do not regard this as particularly problematic – on the contrary I see it as an advantage to avoid assuming a neutral and authoritative voice in this text. Returning to the vocal metaphors: at times I conduct the choir, and sometimes I perform a solo, but in other occasions I might just slip in between the contraltos and sing along.

I wish to establish a similarly egalitarian approach, as it were, in my archive. Above I have listed empirical and theoretical data side by side. Rapley (2007) makes an observation

which is relevant in this respect: He admits that “I am never quite sure when I am conducting my own research what actually *is my ‘data’* and what *is not my ‘data’*. Is a quote I take from a video of a doctor-patient consultation data? Whereas the quote I take from a social science article discussing doctor-patient consultations is not data? (...) All of these areas of activity are central to producing my arguments”(10, original italics).

In a similar sense, I will suggest that the literature which provides my argument with theoretical and methodological devices, constitutes a source of ‘data’ which is not essentially different from interview transcripts or newspaper clippings. One comes to all texts from a subject position, and the texts themselves are also products of subjective experiences and larger systems of knowledge. In my reading of theoretical approaches to “black style” in chapter 2, or my inclusion of anthropological approaches to “Norwegianness” in chapter 5, I bear in mind that these texts are also products of larger discourses and as such they are historical documents, i.e. not only theoretical but also empirical data.

The structure of the thesis

I will end this introduction by giving a brief preview of the chapters to follow. Rather than constructing my thesis according to a traditional structure (such as hypothesis – theory – methodology – data presentation – analysis – conclusion) I will “run about” the notions of “black vocal style in a Norwegian context”. In other words, I attempt to approach the object of study from multiple angles, entering in explorative conversation with my diverse sources. The reader may perhaps experience it as unfulfilling to deal with a structure which does not work its way towards a conclusion and which does not intend to conceal the fact that the limits of the object under investigation are quite arbitrary. However, it would be problematic to produce an argument in a modern and progressive way when the fundamental assumption underlying my exploration is that knowledge is creatively produced in a web of interrelated realities.

“Black faces and white gazes: approaches to appropriation” outlines an historical as well as a disciplinary background to questions of black style and white appropriation in the context of American popular culture. I provide a brief “cultural history” of the phenomenon of white appropriation of black signifiers, as it runs through American history from minstrelsy to hip hop. This phenomenon is regarded in light of post-colonial perspectives on the modern

hegemony's tendency to fetishize and exploit its Others. I go on to discuss of a few central tenets of the theorization of "black style", and I finally take issue with some of the more essentialist tendencies within the field.

"The "neger" and the "Norwegian": on discursive musical categories and performative transformations" elaborates on how cultural and musical identities are shaped and negotiated through performative practices, and conditioned by language contexts. I discuss how social and stylistic categories like 'black', 'white', and 'Norwegian' are actively produced in discursive practices, and observe how the context of popular music interacts with different language contexts in filling these categories with potential new meanings.

"Into the groove: blackness as a metaphor of style" considers blackness as a musicological subject, and suggests that the concept of blackness may be used as a metaphor of a certain stylistic sensibility. I also discuss some of the problems connected to approaching music as an "aesthetic sphere" in the field of Popular Music Studies.

"Styles and stereotypes: conversations on the social significations of sounds" is mainly structured around material from my focus group conversation. I observe how my informants described particular stylistic and expressive features in musical performance as potential signifiers of social categories such as black, white, or Norwegian, and I also attempt to outline some relevant contexts and discourses which may have bearings on the themes discussed. Towards the end of the chapter, I will turn my focus to the notions of authenticity often related to the human voice, and consider how the phenomenon of "cultural appropriation" invokes questions of legitimacy, fake, and imitation.

"Wayfaring voices: an interpretive conversation" finally allows me to enter the music, as I present my own interpretations of two Norwegian singers whose vocal style, staging and public reception seem to articulate, in different ways, some of the central concerns that have been dealt with in the preceding chapters. Through musical analysis of the two cases, I will attempt not only to describe how musical detail captures and reproduces social values, but also to explore how musical styles are experienced as sounding worlds that are governed by the laws of music. By placing this musicological "center of gravity" at the end of my thesis, I am able to invoke the voices from the preceding chapters into my interpretive conversation with these musical discourses.

2. Black faces and white gazes: Approaches to appropriation

It is difficult to inquire into the notions of black style and white appropriation in a Norwegian context – whether these notions take the shape of tacit assumptions or articulated debates – without considering them as residues from the tornadoes of American racial politics, as driftwood stranded on our shores. The present chapter is therefore devoted to a brief outline of this field: I open by drawing a rudimentary sketch of the phenomenon of white exoticization of black signifiers in American history, and include critical voices from American cultural studies into the dialogue. I will go on by considering some central contributions to the theorization of “black style”, and propose that they be regarded in relation to the history of slavery, oppression, and objectification. Finally, I will take issue with some of the most critical (and strategically essentialist) voices in this academic discourse, encountering them from my own subject position, and suggest other strategies²³ for dealing with questions of race, identity, and cultural appropriation.

The allure of the Other

“Whiteness was purchased and fought for by Jews, Catholics, the Irish, Italians, Polish, undentured servants (...) Blackness was never something one had to attain, at least not outside of Bohemian circles. Today, it seems... it is” Greg Tate (2003:37).

The tradition of white appropriation of blackness runs deep in American history. The country’s popular culture is unthinkable without it; indeed it is largely based on the distortion and subversion of racial difference. Blackface minstrelsy, the nation’s first entertainment industry which from its small-scale beginning in the 1830s grew to experience enormous popularity for more than half a century, started out as a racial drag show. White actors painted their faces with burnt cork and performed crude caricatures of black music, dance and demeanour. A few years into this variety tradition, it also incorporated black performers – “Real Negroes” who attracted new curious spectators. This act was also one of explicit parody: wearing the same burned cork mask, black blackface actors imitated white actors

²³ These perspectives will be pursued further in the following chapter.

imitating “Negroes” in a distorted, racial fantasy functioning as light entertainment – and as economical exploitation.

“I shall be rich in black fun”, announced one of the minstrelsy’s progenitors (Lott 1993:18-19)²⁴. His statement is echoed in the notorious prophecy which according to popular myth was made some 80 years later in Memphis: “If I could find a white boy who could sing like a nigger, I could make a million dollars” (see Pattison 1987:32). Not until the Motown label’s black manager, Berry Gordy, managed to convert black music into a dependable meal ticket did blacks profit substantially from the industry ensuing their musical production, and the last decade’s hip hop millionaires follow in this entrepreneurial tradition. The history of white fascination with black music is one of economic exploitation in the shelter of racial repression. But if the motives have been economical and political, the fuel has always been a romantic obsession with black exoticism and authenticity.

The allure of blackness is often ascribed to modern, Western societies’ processes of projecting onto their Others the qualities which the white hegemony denies itself (Said [1978] 2003; Born&Hesmondhalgh 2000). This central condition of modernity has left its mark on opera and modernist art as well as contemporary popular culture. If socially established conventions of normality favour reason (whatever it be), the social outcast is thought to embody madness and intuition. While the modern subject largely has been defined from a masculine identity, the notion of an Other absorbs feminine features (McClary 1991). A set of similarly dichotomized qualities might be listed: mind vs. body, sickness vs. health, western vs. oriental, white vs. black. However simplifying such a list would be, modernity as a whole is hard to outline without taking into account a body of cultural production absorbing and reproducing such dichotomized schemes. These schemes leave imprints on all modes of social expression: they are discernible in figures of speech, in politics, and in musical gestures: Susan McClary (1991) was among the first to explore how Others are expressed as objects of fetishization and fear in music by means of excessive cromatism and other indecent musical behaviour²⁵. In sum, if the modern subjects’ Others are creatures of our desires and fears, then it should not surprise us that they come to embody our fantasies.

Ideas of the primitive have served as an antidote to the malaises of modernity. In line with Darwinism, and inspired by Rousseau, civilization can be seen as a development away

²⁴ T.D. Rice is described by Eric Lott (1995) as an originator of blackface minstrelsy.

²⁵ McClary (1991:15-16) deals with the feminine Other, but her point has relevance also for instances of musical projection and Othering on grounds of race, class, etc.

from an original condition, and education as a loss of the capacities of a *natural state*. Ronald Radano (2000) describes how notions of *black rhythm* from the early 1800s came to symbolize the Negro as the nation's central Other. The *hot rhythms* were thought to emerge from the natural creativity pertinent to a pre-rational, intuitive state. In a way, then, the Negro was closer to life, closer to the "source". And at the same time, he was closer to death: he represented danger. There is an unbroken line running from the 18th century, when drums were banned by colonial powers to prevent the feared uprisings of slaves, through the common hysteria surrounding every new "dance craze" causing white youth to tune into black music, from ragtime to hip hop (Radano 2000; Russel 2002).

The quest for *hip*: from white Negro to wigger

"Do you know what a nerd is? A nerd is a human being without enough Africa in him or her... You know why music was the center of our lives for such a long time? Because it was a way of allowing Africa in".

Brian Eno (Leland 2004:17)

Although the fantasized Negro escaped his "primitive element" and became urbanized, he apparently brought Africa with him. During the Harlem renaissance, groups of whites ventured into black neighborhoods in search of "the wise primitive in the urban jungle", and they were followed by other generations of "white Negroes".²⁶ If we should judge by Norman Mailer [1957](1970), and by John Leland's (2004) cultural analysis, they were on a quest for *hipness*.

Hip is a useful concept for those who wish to understand the dynamics of white fetishization of blackness. Tracing the word '*hip*' to the Wolof (West-African) verb *hepi* (to see) or *hipi* (to open one's eyes) Leland conceptualizes *hip* as "a subversive intelligence that outsiders developed under the eye of insiders. "It was one of the tools Africans developed to negotiate an alien landscape, and one of the legacies they contributed to it" (Leland 2004:5-6). Starting from this obvious parallel to Dubois' [1903](1990) always relevant concept of *double consciousness*, Leland explores the manifestations of *hip* in the street-smart jazz musician, the gangster, the outlaw - all characters who assume mythological status in popular culture.

26 Norman Mailer's notorious essay from 1957 coined the term. Perhaps the best early example of "the white Negro" is Carl van Vechten, a writer and music critic who frequently took the A-train uptown during the 1920s. After he published his controversial bestseller novel *Nigger Heaven* in 1926, he was regarded with less confidence among his black friends, but could increasingly often enjoy the company of likeminded fellows. Read more in Leland (2004:83-85).

Somehow, the mystically self-sufficient quality of *hipness* produced a curious attraction towards the Other or *outsider* among the *insiders*: “The feedback loop of white imitation, co-optation and homage began immediately” (Leland 2004:6) and this feedback loop has continued to ricochet amongst hipsters, beats, hippies, mods, wiggers, and the cultural mainstream.

“I walked... wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kick, darkness, music, not enough night.”

Jack Kerouac [1957]1991:148

Along with his *beat generation*, Kerouac indulged in the desire to own blackness, sulking over the fact that he would never escape his racial privileges: “I am white, but O, my soul is Black”²⁷. During the 1950s the beat subculture of middle-class, urban hipsters emulated the pose of the Other, celebrating a bohemian life-style with drugs, jazz, poetry and non-conformity. An eloquent pronunciation of this obsession with hip blackness was delivered by an educated rocker in the wake of the beats (and according to Robert Pattison (1987:39) he was closer to honesty than satire):

“I wanna be black
Have natural rhythm...
I don't wanna be a fucked-up middle-class college student.”

Lou Reed (ibid.)

In England, middle-class kids listened to Muddy Waters and other old-school blues musicians, and in 1964 a band called the Rolling Stones launched their first album with their own versions of r&b covers. Listening to Mick Jagger's voice and looking at his spastic motions across the stage, the minstrel legacy of rock appears remarkably conspicuous. Jagger's minstrelsy impulse may have been one of romantic devotion, but the economic reward still winded up on the white side of the divide. Sam Phillips found his “white kid” and turned the same trick – Elvis became the King while Chuck Berry and Little Richard had to settle with less. As rock'n'roll came into existence it instantly became the ultimate embodiment of the minstrelsy impulse in American society, with its politics of desire, cultural exchange and economic exploitation. “White fantasies about black culture are the dominant element in the mixture that is rock” (Pattison 1987:41).

²⁷ Pattison's (1987) chapter carrying this title does not refer to Kerouac, but nevertheless I find it to illustrate the quotation above excellently.

No less so in 2007, although black rap artists to a larger degree are reaping the economical fruits of their art. The financial extravaganza itself has become one of the motifs of their artistic expressions, and perhaps this aesthetic might be considered any bit as subversive or revolutionary as the politically charged acts of earlier days. Artist like Jay Z and P. Diddy now manage their own enterprise, as youth all over the world revel in hip hop's versions of blackness. Rap over seventies-samples, baggy clothes, gangstas with bling, misogynists and b-girls with an attitude – hip hop has become the biggest and most globalized popular music industry of the last thirty years, and a considerable majority of hip hop's audiences is assumed to be white²⁸.

Why do white kids love Hip Hop? Bakari Kitwana asks in his study of “wankstas, wiggers, wannabes, and the new reality of race in America” (2005a). Is hip hop's immense popularity an expression of racial barriers dissolving, or yet another instance of white exploitative seizure of black style? The question is complex, but Kitwana ascribes white youth's obsession with hip hop partly to what he explains as “a declining sense of white privilege” (34-36). To Kitwana, it seems probable that “white kids” find solace in the degrading caricatures of blackness produced in hip hop. Moreover, they are able to take part in this global minstrel act as they paint their faces in the burnt cork of our day, throwing the N-word at one another. In homage to hip, in celebration of supremacy.

The Elvis effect

And I just do not got the patience
 To deal with these cocky Caucasians
 Who think I'm some wigger who just tries to be black
 Cause I talk with an accent, and grab on my balls,
 So they always keep askin the same fuckin questions
 What school did I go to, what hood I grew up in
 Eminem, lyrics from “The way I am”
 (Kitwana 2005a:111)

Though Eminem, like many of the kids Kitwana interviews in his book, has been exposed to black culture and music growing up, his participation in a cultural field known as black is subject to suspicion and discussion (see Rux 2003). The discourse problematizing white appropriation is quite substantial both in academic and informal forums. In the lyrics above,

²⁸ Kitwana (2005b) describes how hip hop “deals with an overwhelmingly white live audience”, but also points out that “the often-intoned statistic claiming that 70 percent of American hip-hop sells to white people may cover up more than it reveals” partly because much of the consumption is not accounted for (underground mixtape CD distribution, etc.).

Eminem enters in the discussion and answers critical voices that confront him with his social background in order to challenge his legitimacy within an African-American genre.

The notion of white participation in the “softer” musical universe of soul and r&b seem to raise related, but somewhat distinctive, reactions. While hip hop increasingly has come to signify on²⁹ hypermasculinity and disturbing black stereotypes such as the *gangsta* and the *pimp*, blackness in soul and r&b is more often imagined as body, as sexual prowess and feminized sensuality. However, soul music is also significantly related to the history of social struggle within the black church and civil rights movement, and to a positive, if still stereotyped, celebration of black beauty and pleasure. While hip hop’s origin in marginalized, urban, black, local communities makes white (and particularly white middle-class) hip hop performances particularly problematic and exposed to critique, the phenomenon of white voices producing the sounds of soul is also criticized of illegitimate employment of black stylistic signifiers. It seems that the full right to “sound like that” is difficult to acquire without some organic connection to the African-American experience. The numerous blogs and informal debates over the credibility of recent “British soul invasion” artists such as Amy Winehouse and Joss Stone testify to this impression. As this critic in the *Los Angeles Times* suggests, the comfort level among those engaging in vocal appropriation should not be “too high”:

“If there's one fault on "Introducing," it's that Stone's comfort level with that tradition remains too high. Throughout the album, she sings in a voice she learned from those soul albums; the lilt of coastal England never surfaces. Crafting a new self from beloved popular cultural sources, Stone is very much of her generation; it's her sincerity, her refusal to see that identity as artificial, that singles her out. For years, she's fielded questions about her right to sing in a black style, and on that subject, she's beyond irritated. 'That's a very childish way to look at things,' she huffed in response to the assertion that white artists have sometimes stolen from black artists. 'I don't want to make any money from my records. It's really not about stealing.... This is soul music, we're technically calling this soul music. OK? So they're saying, 'You're not black, you're not American, so how do you expect me to believe that you have a soul?' It's just ridiculous’” (Ann Powers 2007).

Apparently, white performance within the vocal regime of soul manages to produce what Paul C. Taylor has called *the Elvis Effect*: “White participation in traditionally black avenues of cultural production produces feelings of unease” (Neal 2003:80). Perhaps, then, articulating a

²⁹ I employ the expression ‘to signify on’ in the following senses: “to draw its meanings from”; “to (intentionally or unintentionally) gather its semantic contents by playing with”. My use of the term does not rely on any specific linguistic theory; nor does it adhere strictly to Henry Louis Gates’ (1988) concept of Signifyin(g). I may still be somewhat influenced by Gates whose theoretical concept departs from vernacular African-American word-play in African-American forms such as *rap*, *toasts* and *the dozens*.

sense of unease, or at least a certain consciousness about one's sources of inspiration, may render the appropriation less provocative.

So far, this chapter has briefly outlined the phenomenon of "love and theft" in American popular culture. As it turns out, such minstrelsy impulses do not appear to diminish in extent; on the contrary, the many recent examples often take us beyond the American borders. The last part of the chapter will focus on reactions to this phenomenon, and look at some of the central theoretical approaches to black style and white appropriation.

Theorizing blackness: a way of doing something

The fundamental condition of African-American Otherness was described by W.E.B. Du Bois in the groundbreaking work *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. With the term *double consciousness* Du Bois explored the experience of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others", of being simultaneously "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" [1903](1990:2). This *second-sight* results from being forced into the role as the Other by a dominant group with the mandate to define the truths of its society. But the experience *that your own definition of yourself is only secondary*, may also be seen as an expression of "internalized slavery"³⁰. In other words, it is a manifestation of the fundamental lack of autonomy which occurs when one human being becomes the property of another. The legacy of slavery must be taken into account as one considers the ways that musical blackness has been theorized.

With slavery and the Middle Passage came the trauma of being robbed of cultural heritage: African-Americans were often denied the opportunity to perform their own art and cultural rituals, as much musical performance took place within European-American forms and on European instruments. Although creolized, West-African forms such as the rumba and the ring-shout were maintained and performed, sometimes clandestinely, in the Americas (Sublette 2004), the misconception that "a negro was what a white man made him", that the African slaves were "culturally rootless people" and that the harsh conditions of slavery "stripped them of their native African culture" remained quite widespread even as overt expressions of racism became unfashionable in the 1950s (Kolchin 1993:134-135). Black

³⁰ An experience described by Toni Morrison in her Pulitzer- and Nobel-awarded novel *Beloved* (1987)

people's musical practice was often construed as lacking in originality, as infantile imitation devoid of real understanding. Through minstrelsy, the conception of the Negro as comical imitator was of course preserved for a long time. Paul Gilroy (1993) describes the confusion among white audiences in the 19th century when black groups first started touring and performing spirituals: what were "genuine negroes" doing on stage? And how should one enjoy these simple, "*unpretending songs*" (88)? Blackness without its attendant masquerade had become an unsettling experience. This cultural history may appear curious recalling the debates which opened this chapter, where it more often seems that it is *white* musical practice which is denounced as mimesis and lacking in originality. And for the very same reason, I consider it important to bear this background in mind.

The experience of double consciousness, of being socially compelled by other people's image of you, is probably both a prerequisite and a result of the cultural production springing from the minstrel tradition. Many deeply ironical structures in American popular culture have grown out of this dynamic. Duke Ellington's *jungle jazz* in Harlem's Cotton Club during the 1930s gathered its meaning and appeal in stereotypes of exotic and primitive *negritude*. Louis Armstrong, a towering character in American culture, assumed a humble position with his desexualized, minstrel-esque performance and comically rolling eyes. The way that he performed his blackness may be seen as an African-American impulse to comply with the expectations of white hegemony. His "domesticated nigger"-character was regarded with deep mistrust among those who wished to challenge such stereotypes: among others, Miles Davis was strongly critical to old Satchmo's "*Uncle Tomming*". However, conscious play with stereotypes is often a manner of challenging them. When James Brown performed, he styled both his "conk" and his menacing *sex machine* role as far as they would go; Sly Stone's sunglassed, caped and wide-brimmed pimp persona was outrageously outré; and today's hip-hopppers' wide pants, gold-chains and fit-in caps also signify on stereotypes as to provoke both fear and fascination (Roggen 2004:6-8). One way of interpreting these performances, is seeing them as a "liberating manipulating of masks"³¹, as complex signs which resist unambiguous decoding. Potentially subversive mechanisms are at play in texts where *low-others* ostensibly embrace stereotypes of themselves. In his influential work *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Henry Louis Gates Jr. uses Bakhtin's theory of *double-voiced utterances* and employs the concept of Signifyin(g)³² to describe a permeating tendency toward double-talk

³¹ See Middleton 2000:74

³² See footnote above.

in African-American vernacular culture. Perhaps “double consciousness”, the ability to see oneself through the eyes of others which Du Bois described as the curse of Black folk, gives a great advantage when it comes to constructing double-voiced aesthetic expressions. African-American culture is often said to abound in “blue notes”. This, of course, also applies for music.

“Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes you’re behind ... And you slip into the breaks and look around.”

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Gilroy 1993:202)

The practice of making connections between otherness, double meanings and musical ambiguities as exemplified by “blue” notes³³, or describing rhythmical displacement as an articulation of the experience of social displacement, undeniably has a structuralist ring to it. Premising a motivated connection between West-African polyrhythmic structures and a pluralistic African cosmology is a commonplace³⁴. In fact, there seems to be a general tendency to establish cross-modal homologues when theorizing black music, even as structuralist methods have gone out of fashion in cultural studies. Tricia Rose’s (1994) convincing study of hip hop aesthetics is a good example: hip hop reveals functions as a product of, and a necessary reaction towards, the experience of social marginalization as the culture’s main features embody the characteristics of “flow, layering and rupture in post-industrial New York”.

There is also a strong tradition of emphasizing African retentions (both stylistic and conceptual) in the study of “blackness in music”. One of the classic contributions to this vein has come from Olly Wilson (1983), whose model for a long time was almost generic to the analytic discourse on African-American expression: he lists a set of typical features that are characteristic to African-American musical expression, and explains these style traits as African retentions³⁵ and by establishing links to African-American cultural, social and historical conditions³⁶.

³³ For example, Samuel A. Floyd (1991) introduces Gates’ literary concept of Signifyin(g) in black music inquiry.

³⁴ Providing a good example of this, Christopher Small (1987:23) quotes John Miller Chernoff who says that “African affinity for polymetric musical forms indicates that, in the most fundamental sense, the African sensibility is profoundly pluralistic”.

³⁵ Represented by Portia Maultsby, among others.

³⁶ Since lists on (West-)African musical retentions or “Africanisms” in music already abound and are relatively undisputed – with obvious exemptions like Philip Tagg’s (1989) polemic “Open Letter” – I feel no need to repeat typical African-American style traits such as improvisation, antiphonal call-and-response structures and

“In summary, black music may be defined as a musical tradition of people of Sub-Saharan African descent which consists of a shared core of conceptual approaches to music making. These concepts reflect deeply rooted values of this culture and, in essence, consists of fundamental ways of approaching the musical experience” (Olly Wilson 1983:21).

Sterling Stuckey’s (1987) exploration of the *ring shout* as an original black form out of which modern forms have grown, follows in Wilson’s track, as does Samuel A. Floyd’s (1991) employment of Stuckey’s and Gates’s (1988) analyses in the cultivation of the term *call-response* as a central metaphor of black expressions. An important tenet within this tradition is that “inquiry into the music of black Americans (...) should engage perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions from within the Afro-American culture” (Floyd 1991:274) rather than isolating the music in analysis. This, of course, applies increasingly to musical analyses in popular music studies and “new musicology”, whether the object of research is black music or not.

...” I have wanted always to develop a way of writing that was irrevocably black. I don’t have the resources of a musician but I thought that if it was truly black literature it would not be black because I was, it would not be black because of its subject matter. It would be something intrinsic, indigenous, something in the way it was put together – the sentences, the structures, texture and tone – so that anyone who read it would realize. I use the analogy of music because you can range all over the world and it’s still black...”
Toni Morrison (Gilroy 1993:78)

“...the common core of this Africanness consists in a way of doing something, not simply something that is done.” Olly Wilson (1983:3)

“Africanisms in African-American culture (...) exist as conceptual approaches – unique ways of doing things and making things happen – rather than as specific cultural elements” (Holloway 1990:xvii).

Even when blacks were handed a new instrument and a foreign repertoire, stylistic elements and conceptual approaches to music making were brought as clandestine goods into new musical surroundings³⁷. As was commented above, it is necessary to see the mentioned attempts to theorize, describe and conceptualize blackness in light of African-American history: the trauma of slavery and the stigma of being denied cultural specificity. Many of the contributions to this intellectual tradition engage exactly in the project of grasping this

heterogeneous sound ideals. I will, however, return to discuss what is perceived as typically *black* elements in my conversations in chapter 5.

³⁷ Often referred to as “Africanisms”. See Holloway (1990).

specificity, this *blackness*, and fixing it to a particular life experience and to historical conditions.

The quotes above are illustrative of this. As they approach a certain *way of doing something*, they seek to establish *blackness* not so much in content as in *style*. How may the structuring of a sentence, the shaping of a vocal phrase, the texture and tone of a voice or a poem, embody something “irrevocably black”? How do we recognize this blackness? May *stylistic blackness* occur independently from social and physical signifiers of blackness? Say, if bending a note is a manifestation of an African-American Signifyin(g) practice, then how do we deal with blue notes from a Norwegian throat? These are some of the questions I have discussed in my conversations with Norwegian musicians, which I will return to in the following chapters. It does seem, however, that some contributions to the academic discourse on blackness construct a protecting wall around black aesthetics, limiting the access to cultural foreigners.

Ownership and appropriation

“There is a current retrograde trend of black artists who see black life as caricature; there is another part of the same trend, the so-called “new black aesthetic”, which tries to disconnect black art from black life and *make it simply “a style” (...)*”

“To depoliticize the African-American Aesthetic is to disconnect it from the real lives of the Afro-American people and instead make an offering to the seizers (...)”

Amiri Baraka (1991:108, my emphasis)

“It’s also the way They have always tried to erase the Black presence from whatever Black thing They took a shine to”.

Greg Tate (2003:2)

As these quotes suggest, the tenet that black music is expressive of the African-American experience may also take the shape of sharp resistance against the separation of style from its social roots. Consequently, attempts to engage with black style in strictly aesthetic terms (if ever a realistic endeavour) or without obvious regard to the social conditions of blackness, may be fiercely attacked and labelled dubious behaviour approaching racism. Jason Middleton and Roger Beebe (2002) see the early 2000s trend of white rock-rap bands and rap musicians using hip-hop and its images but divorcing them from their black origins as a strategy to re-assert the hegemony threatened by the decline of rock in the late 1990s (2002:159). Kitwana (2005a:102) observes how they refer to this trend interchangeably as

“decontextualization”, “displacing race”, “expunging Black signifiers” and “erasing the Black cultural context”.

In addition to Amiri Baraka and Greg Tate, quoted above, there are other high-profiled exponents of a deep scepticism towards white appropriation of black culture: Nelson George, who has described African-American society and culture brilliantly in several volumes, has been particularly sceptical to the eighties’ phenomenon of *crossover* in popular music (specially in the case of Michael Jackson). In the book-jacket of his *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (1988), another famous cultural protectionist, Spike Lee, states: “Once again Nelson George has shown the direct correlation between the music of black people and their condition. It’s a shame that the more we progress as a people, the more diluted the music gets. What is the answer?”³⁸

In Greg Tate’s anthology from 2003, the title polemically spells out this notion: *Anything but the Burden. What White People are Taking from Black Culture*. Here, the authors dissect what Tate describes as the “long-standing, ongoing, and unarrested theft of African-American cultural properties by thieving, flavourless whitefolk” (Tate 2003:2). Tate takes issue with “the American music industry’s never-ending quest for a white artist who can competently perform a Black musical impersonation”. But he does not stop at denouncing the racist industry; the “Caucasian imitators” themselves, and the “distance between the simplicity of white mimesis and the complexity of Black expression” fall under his criticism (4-5). In another publication from the same year, Marc Anthony Neal seems to concur with Tate’s opinion when he characterizes the phenomenon of “blue eyed soul” (apparently a popularly established expression; it has its own category in Wikipedia³⁹) as a novelty genre which is “at best discomfoting parody and genuflection and at worst sinister appropriation (see Michael Bolton)” (Neal 2003:80).

“Some might say my music’s wack
that it got no soul ‘cause I ain’t black
well how wack is that?
Why won’t you let me sing?
I’m a soul man”.

Lyrics from “Soulman” by Norwegian soul artist Sofian

In the face of the African-American history of ongoing repression and marginalization in America, the aggressive tone of these contributions to the discourse is hard to criticize. A

³⁸ Also referred in Gilroy 1993:96

³⁹ The entry is listed among the references.

general code suggests that engaging with black style commits to a certain consciousness, to acknowledging the black roots and social background from which black music emerges. Kitwana seems to redeem the “white kids” he has interviewed of strong accusations if they demonstrate such an awareness. Awareness or not, one can certainly understand that not only aggression but also a sense of loss may follow from the notion of a massive global cooptation of black music. It is generally recognized that minority populations need to have their own expressive forms; channels through which cultural identity may be negotiated, and collective stories told:

“For a long time, the art form that was healing for black people was music. That music is no longer exclusively ours; we don’t have exclusive rights to it. Other people sing and play it, it is the mode of contemporary music everywhere”.

Toni Morrison (Gilroy 1993:219)

This, though, raises the complicated questions of whether a style may belong to a group, or *what aspects* of a style are reserved for a specific population, particularly in the case of a globally disseminated style. Quincy Jones once said “American culture *is* African-American culture!”⁴⁰, and his statement suggests a two-way process of colonization. If a white musical industry has colonized black music, it has also colonized the media, the hit lists, the radio stations and the clubs, dispersing this music. In a way, then, black musics have indirectly colonized our environments, become part of our *acoustemologies*⁴¹ so to speak – in Norway as much as everywhere else. We listen and inevitably, we learn. Robert Walser and Susan McClary (1994) touch on how deeply the process of cultural exchange may reach, as they invoke the agency of the *body*: “...we would argue that one of the most significant factors in the twentieth-century history of the Western body is what Cornel West calls its “Afro-Americanization” – largely the legacy of black music” (78). Richard Rischar (2000) has studied vocal ornamentation and style in African-American popular ballads of the early 1990s, and he discusses the crossover repertoire by emphasizing its potential *teaching* effect: “...they also teach (black and non-black) audiences *how* to be expressive in a way that is, however slippery to define, presented as African-American” (Rischar 2004:411). James Brown makes a similar observation in the following statement:

⁴⁰ Quincy Jones, interviewed by Charlie Rose (PBS, April 1999). Quoted by Rischar 2004:411

⁴¹ The term (as coined by Steve Feld) refers to “ones sonic way of knowing and being in the world” (Feld 2004:462). I use it here in the sense *sonic environments*, in and through which we articulate our identities and cultural forms.

“Cats complain all the time about white people learning music from blacks. It’s true we’ve kind of had a monopoly on certain kinds of music, but everybody’s entitled to it. They shouldn’t *steal* it, but they’re entitled to learn it and play it. No sense in keeping all the drive on one side, because if you’re teaching people, you’re teaching people”.

James Brown (Brown and Tucker 1986:166)

Alternative approaches to appropriation

I have so far discussed some tendencies in the discourse on black style and white appropriation in both academic and popular circles. Blackness may be located in African retentions; through structural connections between conceptual approaches to music making and general world view; it may be explained as an articulation of “black life”. White engagement with black expressive forms has often been regarded with deep suspicion; it has provoked both anger and a sense of extended loss; and it has been met with tolerance. Although I have tried to present a balanced overview of these debates, my description is of course not “neutral”; my encounters with these texts are thoroughly conditioned by my own position. As a white, female European, politically free and economically privileged, I must ask myself: how should I deal with the fact that I find great aesthetic pleasure in the sound of traditionally black musical genres? What should I make of the fact that my own vocal practice may have been influenced by the music I enjoy listening to? Should I accept labels like “colonizer” and “Caucasian imitator”, and is my discomfort with those labels just a sign that I am in fact contributing to the mindless usurpation of black cultural forms? Should I consider the possibility that my peers and I are, by our position in the world economy and racial hierarchies, doomed to be racists without really taking notice, unconscious colonizers⁴² who deserve to be castigated and ridiculed?

Critical, post-colonial perspectives are perhaps the most adequate we have at hand for dealing with global cultural dynamics in a world of continued social inequality. Such a toolkit makes it possible to uncover structures of dominance and exploitation. However, the practice of exposing hidden structures will in some cases rely on crude generalizations and thereby risk reducing individuals to a mass. Reading the more explicit critical approaches to white appropriation, I have occasionally realized that I do not recognize my own experience. In

⁴² Of the 19th century European, Edward Said [1978](2003) argued: “It is [...] correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric. Some of the immediate sting will be taken out of these labels if we recall additionally that human societies, at least the more advanced cultures, have rarely offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism for dealing with “other” cultures” (204).

other words: in texts ostensibly dealing with “people like me”, I am, as far as I can judge, *out of sight*. Said [1978](2003) showed how orientalism as a world view makes essential connections between a geographical area or a race, and human capacities, in a way which makes the notion of individual agency and human development impossible. However, citing all “white” agency in support of a dehumanized “western” or “white” hegemony similarly implies losing the individual out of sight, in an equally problematic way. Such an approach often represents a racist reversal of racism, without which we would perhaps be better off⁴³.

For my purposes, this perspective also has the disadvantage of ignoring the complexities of cultural exchange, here observed by Leland:

“African-Americans were copied by white Americans, who were copied by French existentialists, who were copied by white intellectuals, who were copied by black hipsters, who were copied by Jewish rappers, who were copied by Brazilian street kids, who were – well, I think you know where this is taking us. It is taking us to the Jungle Club in Tokyo, where Japanese hipsters wear dreadlocks and emulate the funk musician Bootsy Collins” (Leland 2004:10-11).

Can we gauge the potential meanings of, say, French, Japanese, West-Norwegian or South-Swedish rap acts solely by considering them as instances of white cultural theft? In most cases, such a simplistic approach would probably miss the target. If one really is interested in trying to understand the complex notions of “black” vocal performance in a Norwegian context, essentialist and fiercely protectionist models will prove less than helpful. Paul Gilroy (1993) meets these problems more constructively: He refutes the narrow perspective and overintegrated sense of cultural and ethnic particularity (31-36) of a Black Nationalist position, and asks (75): “What special analytical problems arise if a style, genre, or particular performance of music is identified as being expressive of the absolute essence of the group that produced it? What contradictions appear in the transmission and adaptation of this cultural expression by other diaspora populations, and how will they be resolved?”

While Gilroy elaborates on these questions, he simultaneously dismisses the opposing relativist/pluralist position denying the notion of any coherent organizing principle of blackness or black cultural production. “Whatever the radical constructionists may say, [black identity] is lived as a coherent experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires” (ibid.:102). If we were to move *beyond the Black Atlantic* and deal

⁴³ Born&Hesmondhalgh (2000:5) elaborate on the same point.

with cases of non-black non-Americans who engage in black cultural expressions, it still seems fair to assume that their sense of self “remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires”. And if we regard *the voice* as a sonic representation of the body as well as a tool for shaping gestures, articulating desires, and playing with language, then we might say that the voice becomes a space for exploring and performing subjectivities. “Key to Gilroy’s demolition of the essentialist/antiessentialist binary is the primacy he places on the relationship between the body and discourse as a complex, dynamic, intricate web of significations and meanings that are simultaneously experiences as real and imaginatively produced”, Johnson (2003:207) observes. In the next chapter I will explore how vocal and social subjectivities take form by playing on the structures of language and music.

3. The “neger” and the “Norwegian”: On discursive musical categories and performative transformations

In the previous chapter I discussed the phenomenon of white appropriation of black style as an expression of white exoticization and repression of black people, and as an instance of cultural theft. Addressing stylistic participation as *theft* may not only imply that the economical rewards benefits the appropriator, but that the style itself *belongs* to the originator. I showed how black style has been theorized and explained as deeply intertwined with black life, i.e. the social conditions and history of the African-American people. Whilst acknowledging this as an important precondition of any discussion of African-American stylistic forms, I finally suggested that a model which puts equation marks between a style and a social group, will be less successful in handling the complex dynamics of cultural influence which emerge in a globalized world.

This chapter will present alternative ways of dealing with white play with black stylistic signifiers, and suggest a view of identity (‘racial’, social, and stylistic) which is more fluid and negotiable. This attempt to de-essentialize the concept of ‘racial identity’ relies on the acknowledgement of language as socially constructive, which was introduced in chapter 1. “The human world is a conversational reality”, Kvale (1997:47) proposes, and describes how modern philosophy has been characterized by a number of “turns” such as the conversational, the linguistic, the narrative, and the pragmatic turn (52). The linguistic turn, emphasizing language play, speech acts and performativity, language and text analysis as well as hermeneutic interpretation has been radicalized further in post-modern philosophy: “Language constitutes reality, and each individual language constructs reality in its own way” (53).

Departing from this assumption, I will discuss how categories such as ‘black’, ‘white’, and ‘Norwegian’ are produced and transcended through language practices as well as musical participation, and how they arguably have dynamic and dialogic relations to notions of Self and Other. I will also discuss how (social, cultural, musical, and discursive) contexts contribute to making sense of these categories. How are notions of blackness and whiteness informed by a “Norwegian” and an “American” context, and how does popular music affect this relationship?

Language wars: the “neger” and the “Norwegian”

”The *neger*⁴⁴ was more elevated than God”

“It sounds ‘*neger*’”

A discursively oriented analysis acknowledges how social reality is created through language practice. Both patterns of domination and mechanisms of subversion are exercised by manipulating of and playing on structures of signification. The way we experience and participate in our lifeworld is intimately connected to the language available for describing it, and our “truths” rely crucially on the words by which we express them. Therefore, I will start with words.

Joseph E. Holloway’s introduction to *Africanisms in American Culture* offers an informative and brief record of the disputes over the naming of the African-American population, running through terms such as African, negro, brown, colored, mulatto, Afro-American, black, and African-American (1990:xviii–xx). Another recently published book addresses explicitly how racism has been exercised and facilitated through language in American history: in *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn’t, and Why* Jabari Asim scrutinizes the role of racist language, and the so-called N-word in particular, in American rhetoric and public conscience. In what ways have American language disputes affected how we speak of race in Norway? In fact, there have been a number of public debates on racial and cultural designations in Norway in the course of the last decade. Significantly, the word *neger* was subject to a large debate in 2000 with repercussions in subsequent years. In 2006, this was echoed in the tumult caused by Norsk Språkråd’s (The Norwegian Language Council) definition of the word ‘Norwegian’ (“nordmann”), and as I write the discussion seems once more to have yet again come to the forefront of the news agenda.

The dispute in 2000 was initiated by the sprinter John Ertzgaard who requested publicly not to be referred to as a *neger*. Organizations from the African minority population in Norway had attempted to raise this debate several times in the previous years, but never achieved the attention that Ertzgaard managed to provoke. Nor did they manage to assume a very central position in the public discussion which finally did come along. The mandate to decide which words should be used when we speak of blackness in the Norwegian language was apparently not granted the African-Norwegian population. In broadcast debates and readers’ letters, the dispute was rather dominated by Norwegians who were irate not to be

⁴⁴ ‘Neger’ is an approximate translation of the word Negro.

allowed to determine how to use their own language, according to the Norwegian social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad. She analyzed the “*neger* debate” (Gullestad 2003), and concluded that the outcome was that the word *neger* was largely declared to be *neutral*. Among those who voiced this view were the high-profile language professor Finn Erik Vinje, and the ministry of culture⁴⁵. Fortunately, the debate also contributed to an increased awareness among majority Norwegians that many people perceive the word *neger* as an offensive term.

Of course, assuming that the word *neger* is neutral is a misconception: a word is never neutral when it is used in a context. The intention behind using it may be good, but a word’s meaningful contents are not fixed; they are subject to interpretation and distortion. Naming a social category is always a politically charged act, and no-one is in single command over a word’s inherited connotations. Much less so with a word with such a heavy semantic cargo derived from a colonial mindset.

How, then, is such an assertion possible, and moreover by people who should be well aware of the word ‘Negro’s derogatory connotations? According to Gullestad (2003:152), this misconception relies heavily on a common myth. The myth of a particular, Norwegian brand of impeccability is arguably maintained in the collective mentality of our population⁴⁶: An ideal image describes a country which was never a colonial power; in fact Norway was colonized by the Danish for centuries and later occupied by the Nazis. A nation with strong traditions of helping other less fortunate ones through missionary work and in more recent times through substantial financial aid to poorer countries and peacemaking, the concept of Norway as a colonizer, occupant or repressor has remained very remote in the public consciousness (Tvedt 2005). Gullestad lays out her analytical point quite convincingly: Claiming that the word “*neger*” is neutral is inferring that it was detached from its colonial context, and cleansed of its offensive potential, as it crossed the Norwegian border and entered a zone incapable of sin.

One hardly has to explain how problematic this conception is, in a country swimming in oil riches, with one of Europe’s most restrictive refugee policies and a history of colonization and slave trade under the Danish flag. I think it is right to say, however, that

45 The ministry of culture granted economical support to a feature movie called *Svidd Neger* (“Burned Negro”) in 2003, and in the following debates they assumed this position.

46 A public (and oft-ridiculed) manifestation of Norwegian self-righteousness was former Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland’s famous remark, “It is typically Norwegian to be good”, made before the Winter Olympics at Lillehammer in 1994.

accompanying Norwegian arrogance and self-righteousness, there are other significant reasons for the reluctance to sort out the language issues discussed above. Despite the mentioned debates, the discourse on ethnic difference in Norway is still young and quite limited. Many Norwegians are simply uncertain of what to say.

Kaja: “There is a divide, you know, and it’s necessary to be able to address it. I don’t think it will ever be evened out to the extent that no such categories are necessary and there is no “black and white”... Oh, now I sounded like a racist!”

While conducting my interviews, I sometimes experienced how difficult questions of black style were to address with a tape recorder rolling. An uneasy atmosphere would occasionally arise as I presented my questions and referred to the concept of blackness. One might suspect that this discomfort was related to the dilemmas of white appropriation which were discussed in chapter two. However, I observed that such notions remained relatively unfamiliar to my informants, and my impression was rather that the uncertainty was related to the language itself. How do we address race without being racist? Indeed it may seem that in certain environments, solely speaking of skin-color qualifies as racism. My bookshelf - with all its titles on blackness and whiteness – certainly testifies to an outspokenness (and obsession) with racial categories in American academic discourse. But this discourse is quite distinct from our local, Norwegian climate of debate.

When I in 2004 spent nearly a year in New York City, first in Harlem and then in a predominantly Black and Latino neighborhood in Brooklyn, I was taken by surprise the first time a man addressed me on the street as “snowflake”. It was unusual to experience people *not pretending* not to notice skin-color. But the American nation has imagined itself around racial categories since the very beginning – and the hegemony has assumed its position by means of them. The social democracy of Norway, on the other hand, has often been described as a society which not only has strong egalitarian traditions, but which is obsessed with equality and sameness⁴⁷. Difference thus arguably represents a taboo. No doubt, discursive and mental categories organizing people according to ethnic background, class, gender, religion, sexuality, way of living, etc (and implicitly rating their value and status according to these categories) exist no less here than other places. But many Norwegians seem to be uncertain about how to expose them through language practice.

⁴⁷ The Norwegian term *likhet* translates into both *equality* and *sameness*, and makes it difficult to distinguish between these meanings. This is often said to affect a particular Norwegian ethics of sameness (see Gullestad 1989:85-86).

African-Americans have fought for generations for the power to define the concept of blackness, and the language with which to name it. The fight will perhaps never end; racial signifiers are absurdly determining as to social and economical status, and racism still prevails. But at least, the black American community has assumed a strong voice in the debates over 'racial' terminology. Through hard symbolic warfare, the term 'black' has assumed new and positively charged meanings which are familiar to people around the globe. Why has it, then, been so hard for the Norwegian organization *African Youth*⁴⁸ to convince Norwegians that the Norwegian equivalent, 'svart' is a useful term⁴⁹? Is it not uncomplicated to translate a perfectly simple word, which we know to be acceptable "over there"?

Let me describe my own experience: To me, 'black' often signifies on 'beautiful', 'power', and 'pride'. Positively charged meanings (and stereotypes) have been meticulously or forcefully filled into the term in the course of decades, and as a result I personally feel comfortable using the word, certain that in most cases I am unlikely to offend or hurt. The experience, however, has been notably different when I speak my mother tongue. Instead of evoking the connotations of self-determinacy and pride which make the American word 'black' such a powerful term, the Norwegian 'svart' easily comes across as an unpleasant little word. I have at times observed disbelief in people's face when I use it, and had to assure them that "it's OK to say". Obviously, if the members of a gospel choir throughout their adolescence have spoken of talented black performers with respect and admiration, referring to them as '*negere*', they have little reason to feel that the word has negative connotations until a public debate makes them aware of it.

Morten: "Black people... hm, I think I'll just have to keep using [the term] neger, I guess I am kind of brainwashed in that way. So if it's ok, I'll just keep saying it, and then you can just translate it in the quotations".

'Svart' may to some may have a harder, perhaps dirtier ring to it. I also have the impression that many Norwegians are still more comfortable speaking of a "mulatt", with its apparent racist implications, than of a "svart person" ("black person"). And while "a colored woman" sounds extremely derogatory in an American context, the Norwegian equivalent "en farget kvinne" rather resonates of good intentions and cautious respectfulness. Probably the only

⁴⁸ See www.ayin.no

⁴⁹ I should add that it seems to me that the use of the term 'svart' is increasing steadily.

word which translates with relatively little friction, is the so-called N-word. I refrain from printing it⁵⁰.

In other words, we must consider the historical processes through which our language comes to signify. Direct translation requires groundwork. The semantic warfare on ‘racial’ terminology has not gone on long enough in Norway; there are still forts to be taken: while ‘black’ has been walking with its back straight; ‘svart’ has not quite broken free from the chains. My own trick to get comfortable using the term, was to make implicit connections to the American significance of ‘black’. I let the American discourse seep into my own language.

Of course, despite its reconquered legitimacy, the concept “*black*” is among the greatest absurdities of our time. North-Americas racist *one-drop rule* has conveniently wiped out most traces of cultural complexity in American public discourse, fitting all groups and individuals into the scheme white/black according to an essential, racial divide. What the discursive practices derived from this scheme all fail to acknowledge, is how fluid and relative most cultural, national, and ethnical categories are. Sometimes I am Norwegian. Sometimes I am white. I am European, but “not a part of Europe” as they say in Spain (since Norway has not entered the European Union). In Brazil last summer I was mystically categorized as Western. And when I went to salsa class in the US, I experienced to my surprise that I had entered the category “Anglo-American”. Sometimes, as I mentioned in chapter 2, I am even a “colonizer”, a category I certainly would like to define as an Other.

In what ways are these categories defined by their surrounding context, and how are they produced in discursive relationship to one another? How does ‘white’ relate to ‘Norwegian’, or say, ‘black’ to ‘them’ in a Norwegian context? And what has music got to do with it?

⁵⁰ From this discussion it should be obvious that the Norwegian word ‘neger’ and the English word ‘negro’ don’t have the exact same meanings in their respective contexts, although they are closely related. I therefore find it misleading to translate this particular term as I quote statements from my interviews.

Discursive transformations

From Norwegian to white in popular music

Who are we, and who are the Others, in a Norwegian context? This is of course an impossible question to answer. But Gullestad (2003) showed in her analysis that the black/white dichotomy is not entirely fitting for a Norwegian cultural reality. In the discourse surrounding the *neger* debate, *being white* was hardly ever referred to. Rather, notions of “Norwegian culture” and “Norwegian language” were invoked to point to “us”, the “Norwegians”. Who, then, are “they”? “The contrast to the Norwegian”, Gullestad suggests, “is no longer primarily the Danish, Swedish or German, but the “immigrant”, the “Muslim” or, quite right, the “*neger*” (ibid.:153). She concludes that “The opposite of being a “*neger*”, is being a Norwegian”. The concept of whiteness, just like race, comes in many shades and has less to do with color than culture. Gilroy (1993:8) explains that “prior to the consolidation of scientific racism in the nineteenth century, the term “race” was used much in the way that the word “culture” is used today”. The concept of Norwegianness may perhaps, then, be defined as a local concept of whiteness.

I would also like to propose that in the context of the “*neger*-debate” as described by Gullestad, the term ‘*neger*’ refers in a derogatory sense to a stereotyped figure which differs significantly from the notion of an “African-American”. The *neger* who posed against the Norwegian conflates with the “muslim” or simply the “immigrant”, arguably belongs to another mental category than the black man on the movie screen who, whether a clown, a gangster or a superlover, mastering the language of *hip*. The “*neger*” speaks no *important* language fluently, hardly even Norwegian. He seldom comes across as an object of desire or admiration, as he swipes the floors of an office building inside the Norwegian imagination. Although the “*neger*” and the “African-American” are related and some qualities undoubtedly transfer from one image to the other⁵¹, I think we are dealing with the difference between a low-other and the hegemonic construction of the “American” through whose eyes the Norwegian often *looks at his self*⁵². In specific contexts, however, social categories are

⁵¹The word *neger* may of course in some cases denote the exoticized or *hip* stereotype of blackness (as my interview material clearly demonstrates). In other words, we are dealing with different stereotypes, some positively and some negatively charged, whose names are locally established. For the clarity of my discussion in this paragraph, however, I choose to hang on to Gullestad’s use of the *neger* as a low-status Other, as opposed to the fetishized African-American.

⁵² The Norwegian media are flooded with news from North-American popular culture and politics, and our economy has, due to our oil production, tight bonds to the American. It seems fair to say that Norwegians often judge our national products in popular music (or for example movie production) by comparing them to an “American standard”.

transformed and we imagine ourselves differently. The black/white dichotomy arguably makes a lot more sense as Norwegian mental scheme as we enter the world of popular music.

It is, as Gullestad observed, relatively uncommon to hear someone refer to their identity as “white” in this country. I therefore noticed a comment from an interview with the Norwegian vocalist Erik Røe as he was releasing his solo album in 2004. Røe had achieved fame in the 1990’s with the Bergen-based funk/pop band *Baba Nation*, but was now on a quest for a more personal expression:

Being white, Norwegian Eric I [eventually] had to come up with something different than imitating soul. The record became more guitar-influenced than I had though when I started out. I am just happy to have found a genre mix I can call my own (Røe quoted by Riesto 2004; my translation).

Here, Røe suggests that his Norwegian identity associates him with a white identity in a musical sense. Implicitly opposed to this, is the black musical expression he was representing during his years with *Baba Nation*, when he was “imitating soul”. Interestingly, he invokes the guitar as a testimony of how white the result has become. This both speaks to how successfully appropriated the guitar has been into the increasingly white sphere of rock, and it reveals that Røe’s now more *honest* musical statement is not honest due to its *Norwegianness* (guitar is not an instrument traditionally pertaining to a Norwegian cultural environment), but its *whiteness*.

A similar logic was revealed in a conversation I had with a singer and devotee of the genre bluegrass, which is currently experiencing an increasing popularity among students and other young, urban Norwegians. She indicated that to her it appeared more “natural”, and less problematic, to chose to express herself in this musical genre than in a genre signifying on blackness. The African-American influence on bluegrass (banjo, etc) and the strong implications of place (Southern USA) notwithstanding, bluegrass seems to be quite easily absorbed into a construction of Norwegianness: the fiddle and the non-vibrato vocal aesthetic are common features of American and Norwegian folk music. And if the countryside imagery is not universal, it is easily open to recontextualization. When I visited the bluegrass festival “Down at the Farm” outside of Risør in the summer of 2007, groups of bearded young men in lumberjack shirts and jeans with leather belts would gather around the fire at night with their mandolins, banjos and fiddles, singing along in straight, nasal voices with a thick Southern (American) accent. Although the scene appeared to be a moment of collective performance, the participants’ relaxed and effortless manner was designed to signal authentic belonging.

Simultaneously, bluegrass offers a desirable *escape* from Norwegianness. Its farmhouse scenery signifies heavily on an American authentic utopia of the good-old-days, into which internationally minded urban hipsters may enter with a mixture of devotion and irony. The transformation is facilitated by the notion that, after all, bluegrass is “white”.

But sometimes, escaping Norwegianness is not an excursion into the foreign as much as it is *escaping* the foreign:

Kathrine: “At home we [the informant and her sister] would listen to Take6 and Whitney Houston, and that was the music we would sing to, sitting by the piano”.

“...We also sang in a girl’s choir with extremely strict voice training and a “pretty” voice ideal. A classical ideal where we should *restrict* our voices, I feel. That’s the way I grew up, I had to sing pretty, and in a high voice register. Which isn’t too healthy, I think. But singing less “pretty”, that was something we would do at home, digging pop music and Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey and that sort of thing. I felt like *proper music* was something we had to sing at choir rehearsal and then there were the things we did at home which were something completely different”.

“...It was more like something *they* did over there (...)”.

One of the women in my focus group described childhood and adolescent experiences of musical cross-identification and arguably, alienation. The choir was where she got her voice training, and her musical identity was closely related to this background. But at home she would enter in another vocal mode, enjoying the release from this restriction. From the way she put it, one might get the impression that she was *at home* in more than one sense when she was “digging” Houston and Carey. And yet she may be revealing a growing awareness that this expression “belonged” to someone else, and not directly involved her. The practice in the girl’s choir was “proper music” while the music at home was something “different” which “*they* did over there” (with emphasis on “*they*”). I think this ambiguity reveals how alienation and identification may arise in unexpected ways, and that the sense of self and experience of otherness sometimes conflate. It also suggests that politics of *normative* cultural identification influence where we situate ourselves in the landscape.

Remodelling otherness: from svart to black

Hip hop, soul and r&b are possibly the popular music genres with the highest minority representation in Norway. In fact, a significant share of the more profiled Norwegian soul and

r&b artists have a visible minority background, such as Sofian, Noora, Winta, and Mira Craig. Besides obviously attracting a considerable mainstream audience, these black musical genres seem to have a strong appeal among youth with a minority background. There have been several studies of minority youth in Oslo who engage with hip hop and discover new spaces for cultural interaction and participation⁵³.

Social anthropologist Viggo Vestel (2003) has studied the use of hip hop culture in a suburb in the Grorud valley in Oslo, which has a high minority representation and a hefty social stigma. “The suburb has a poor reputation, and the youngsters were often kidding about “coming from the slum”, Vestel explains in an interview (Christensen 2003). But if this was ostensibly just a humorous figure of speech, exaggerating the poor conditions may also have been part of a powerful strategy of reinventing place in order to assume dignity.

“I think it [the movie *Beat Street*] struck home on the whole east side⁵⁴ because it resembles it; tall, grey apartment buildings, the red subway rolling through the valley, you know, it really looked like the Bronx, people recognized it... we kind of looked at ourselves as “negere” too, you know (...)” (Christensen 2003, my translation).

The Grorud valley is here effectively transformed into the Bronx of the 1970’s (obviously more desirable as an exotic fantasy than as lived reality), the high rises become housing projects, and the Oslo subway is imagined into the MTA of New York City. A social reality is replaced by a fantasy. But with *real*, social repercussions: “Through the hip hop community, the youth came into their own. Ola and Ben were the best break dancers, and won respect through that”, explains Vestel (ibid.).

As was discussed earlier, there is a significant gap between the *neger* as the Norwegian’s low-other, and more fetishizing concepts of blackness. But through performative play with typical signifiers of musical blackness, Norwegian minority youth are able to convert their stigmatizing Otherness into a much higher currency: they go from *svart* to *black*.

Norwegians with foreign ethnic backgrounds may, then, have considerable symbolic gains from associating themselves with musical blackness. Through musical practice they are able

⁵³ One (unpublished) example is Jan Sverre Knudsen and Stan Hawkins’ research project “Bonds and Boundaries in a Multi-cultural Norwegian Space” which was a part of the CULCOM program at the University of Oslo: see <http://www.culcom.uio.no/nyheter/2005/hawkins-knudsen.html>

⁵⁴ The east side (østkanten) of Oslo often refers in general to the “working class” areas in the suburbs as well as in the inner city.

to transcend a social reality which ties them to negative significations, and enter in a larger cultural context which allows them to breathe more freely as they choose their own stereotypes. This certainly makes evident the potential power of popular music to change our lives.

Also majority Norwegians, such as myself, are able to map ourselves onto a wider cultural map through musical participation. Through this process, whiteness comes to make sense as identifier and leak into our construction of “Norwegianness”. And the other way around, conceptions of Norwegianness read into how we construe that whiteness. The power of music interacts with the power of our language in creating categories for social behaviour – and transcending them.

Legitimate influences and mainstream material

“One of the soloists. Rumors say she is really a *neger*. It could certainly sound like it...”⁵⁵

So far in this chapter I have dealt with categories of social identity in a Norwegian context, and tried to shed some light on how a musical context informs our ideas of who we are. It seems that musical whiteness may read into our construction of Norwegianness, and that musical blackness may influence the construction of the “*neger*” or “immigrant”. Turning my focus to one of the central questions of my exploration: how may musical blackness influence identity construction among majority-Norwegians? How may blackness read into whiteness or Norwegianness?

In order to approach this question, I will involve some of my interview material and look at how the concept of musical blackness was dealt with.

Morten: I used to sing in a gospel choir, and there the *neger* was deified. The word *neger*, and... Because that is sort of the big thing. And so you do all you can to imitate the black sound, and “*neger*”. You use all possible means.

The only man in my focus group had grown up engaging with gospel, and later soul music. He described how much of the activity in his gospel choir encircled an explicit conceptualization of vocal blackness. The *neger* not only represented a significant musical Other, but this Other became the object of outspoken study and, in a way, worship:

⁵⁵ Caption from a web review of a concert with the Norwegian gospel choir “Safari”, published on the Christian web magazine www.jay.no (Holmedahl 2000, my translation).

Morten: “The *neger* was more elevated than God”.

This statement may easily be described as a manifestation of white exoticization of blackness, as this was discussed in the previous chapter. The overall pattern of white engagement with black signifiers was eagerly discussed in my focus group. They commented on the impression that white singers “singing black” are much more common than black singers “singing white”, and perhaps they were also prone to explain this phenomenon by conceptualizing a “black” vocal sound as something *desirable*. One of my informants expressed a sort of confusion over an example of the opposite: an “afro-babe” (she couldn’t recall the name of the artist) who, in her opinion, “didn’t sing black at all”:

Oda: “What is so interesting is that this is in the r&b genre. But she absolutely does not sound black! So then I thought... Hm! Maybe she is not able to [sound black?] Or did she choose it? What happened?”

The rest of the focus group also expressed interest in this curious phenomenon. Of course, one of the aspects of this particular case is that a “non-black” vocal style within a “black” genre implies an uncommon stylistic innovation. But from the discussion which followed, it appeared my informants found dispensing with a black vocal style, if that were the case, an odd thing to do.

Above I included an example of how Norwegian immigrants may signify on exotic or *hip* Blackness with positive symbolic outcome. In light of the postcolonial tradition of African-American cultural studies, this phenomenon appears less incriminating: after all, we are dealing with one low-Other signifying on another, and arguably not an instance of hegemonic usurpation. One might even allege that the Pakistanis, Africans and Bosnians in the Grorud Valley hold a *hepi* position, an outsider’s look, which enables and entitles them to play with stereotypes in a rewarding manner. In the case of majority-Norwegians who express a desire to sound black, however, how can we ignore the notion of illegitimate appropriation? Which manifestations of appropriating blackness are legitimate, and which are not? Is it more comfortable to deal with this phenomenon if we can explain it as a coping strategy in a painful situation (for example due to social marginalization)?

When I selected my informants, I looked for people with some experience from African-American musical genres (soul, funk, gospel, etc). Apart from that, my informants had different stories and backgrounds. I had a long conversation with a girl who identified

very strongly with the African-American history of suffering. I never learnt where her identification came from, but I did perceive that she was very emotional and deeply respectful in her engagement with black style. I got the impression that when she engaged with black style through vocal practice, she entered an important and serious space in her life⁵⁶. Two of the persons in my focus group had a gospel background, and partly related musical blackness to religious devotion and emotional expression. Another was more firmly set in the tradition of European art music and vocal style, and (as was mentioned) she seemed to construe black vocal style as a foreign and free space inside which she could escape the obligations of the “proper” musical sphere.

These individuals’ motives for engaging with black style could probably be explained as personal coping strategies (because in a way all musical practice is), and their introduction to the style might be presented as result of some “genuine” relation to a subculture or a church. But most Norwegians are probably introduced to black vocalists and genres through a commonly shared musical mainstream: listening to commercial crossover-ballad hits on MTV, consuming musical commodities, watching international motion pictures.

Morten: ”And we had a soul band too, playing Mustang Sally and songs like that, from that Irish movie. That was sort of a *wave*. So we did a lot of that, singing soul songs”.

The concept of a “mainstream” easily produces uncomfortable connotations and evokes Adornian impulses in a musical scholar. This might be the reason why most of them prefer to devote their efforts on the rims and edges, not to say the flipside, of this insidious monster. Philip Tagg [1982](2000:99) has pointed to this obvious blank space in musical scholarship, and is quite right to argue that in order to understand opposition we must understand that which it poses itself against. But is it strictly necessary to legitimize studies of dominant expressions as a means of understanding underprivileged expressions? I would rather propose that it is important that cultural researchers *challenge* simplistic, popular notions of a mindless mainstream: such notions (like the notion of “normality”) easily dissolve between our fingers when we pick them up to look at them. This does not least apply to how “mainstream expressions” are employed and negotiated in individual perception. We all have our life stories which contribute to how we make sense of music – but that shouldn’t mean we have to paint those stories black in order to give them scholarly attention.

⁵⁶ a space which was so intimate that I decided not to refer from my interview with her.

Perhaps “mainstreamed” musical expressions have been removed from their local and specific setting, chewed and spit out as something anyone can digest. But as the youth of Grorud valley demonstrate, new notions of place are invented in order for the music to make sense. Whichever way one chooses to see it, the “commercial mainstream” represents a considerable cultural force in the lives of 21st century citizens from most continents. And among the most important things it provides, are role models, mirrors and fantasies in which we may imagine ourselves.

Sounds of blackness down under

E. Patrick Johnson’s article “Sounds of blackness down under” in the book *Appropriating Blackness. Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003) elaborates on how the trope of performance facilitates the appropriation of blackness. Construing not only his object’s actions but also his own writing and participation in the field as performance, Johnson offers an insightful and wonderfully transparent exploration of a case with great relevance to the present thesis: “An all-white, mostly atheist Australian gospel choir” called the Café of the Gate of Salvation (161).

Being an African-American musician as well as a scholar, Johnson is granted an important role in the choir when he arrives “down under” to do his research, coaching them musically as well as representing an authenticating black presence to many of the members. He works with the choir as they strive to achieve the “right” sound and expression of a music which they clearly conceptualize as the culture of someone else, but with which they also identify by means of different mental strategies. Getting close to an “authentic” gospel performance is a challenge - some of singers are what Johnson calls “rock-and-clap-challenged” (167). The vocal sound is also hard to get right; a woman in the choir puts it this way:

“None of us have that sharp voice that cuts through, those sharp women’s voices that sound like boy’s voices. That’s what a woman’s voice should sound like in my book. There are some great solo singers in the choir, but they don’t sound the same. We don’t move in time, we don’t clap in time. God knows what we’re really doing really” (167).

Johnson points out that the singers are not necessarily trying to sound “black”, but they are very concerned to get closer to an “authentic” performance of gospel. This, of course, makes for an interesting study of conceptions, misconceptions and myths surrounding black authenticity. Questions of heritage and origin, of spirituality and religion, of imitation and

emotional engagement are addressed quite boldly by help of individual stories. Throughout the piece, Johnson demonstrates an impressive reflexivity: also he is at times forced to face his complicity in perpetuating racist stereotypes (204-205).

As a culmination of the choir's effort to get closer to the "real thing", they finally manage to raise enough money to travel to the United States. In a captivating moment, Johnson describes their performance in the Baptist House of Prayer in Harlem, New York. He is seated among the congregation and witnesses how the Australians finally, somehow, "get it right" and through performance enter in a liminal space where self and Other converge: "They traverse the world of the Other, glimpse its landscape" (215) and thus, "for all intents and purposes, the Café of the Gate of Salvation, in face of evidence to the contrary, "became" black" (216) – of course, as he points out, without being deprived of their white-skin privilege outside this symbolic space of performance. The choir's gospel performance, in Johnson's words, "foregrounded the arbitrariness of black signification" (216). In fact, the title of Johnson's book suggests that blackness is a quality which may be, and perhaps to some extent *must* be appropriated through performative practice – even by black subjects.

Role models and the performance of possibilities

Oda: "As to me... you see Whitney Houston was the big idol up until then. I liked other artists too, but Whitney was sort of "mine". But then this one came along, and that was like wuhuu!! I didn't reflect over whether she was white or black though, what is she, anyway?"

Mari: "I was like: Is this for real!"

Kathrine: "Yes, it was just amazing. I would sit and cry, and listen to "Hero" fifteen times in a row and just (sobbing sounds)"

The three women and one man in my focus group were the same age as I, and we shared many of the same references. The escapades at the piano which Kathrine had told us about were familiar to all of us. I asked the girls in particular how they had reacted when Mariah Carey came along –since she was an artist appearing to be "white" or at least racially ambiguous, but performing in an ornamented style which was often associated with black singers.

Oda: "The first time I saw that music video, I was nearly knocked off my feet! It was that song..."

As Oda started imitating Mariah's iconic ad-libs from her first single "Vision of Love", the two other girls joined in. It seemed they had all honed their vocal skills against this model in early adolescent years.

About six months after I had finished my interviews, an e-mail arrived in my inbox. It was an invitation to "all girls", to come and dream ourselves away, to "sing and cry and have a great time". Finally realizing an old dream, the writer explained, she had gathered a group of wonderful singers, and together they would devote a whole evening in tribute to "the fantastic diva Whitney Houston". The subject line disclosed the title of the event: Queen of the Night. The mail was written by an acquaintance of mine, a female singer whom I knew to have one of the most wonderful soul voices in town. The concert scene was just a few blocks from where I live, and the artist subject to celebration was my big childhood heroine. I immediately decided to attend the show.

The night of the concert I arrived just as the event was about to begin. The place was packed, which surprised me: this particular scene was one of the "hippest" spots in town, absolutely not in the custom of billing cover bands, and I had assumed that the interest for Whitney Houston's ballades would have faded significantly since she raved the radio stations in the 1980s and 1990s. But there, to prove me wrong, were a crowd of cheerful, dressed-up, Norwegian, late-twenties-to-mid-thirties girls whom I had to force myself past in order to find a spot at the back of the room. The lights went out and the band started counting, and onto the stage paraded six or seven girls on high heels, their blond hair illuminated by the shining spotlights as they went right into the first song in celebration of their black "queen of the night". The crowd went crazy. One after one, Whitney's hits were presented, and one after the other the singers stepped forward on stage to call out Whitney's ornamented phrases, the best they could do. Their efforts were encouraged by an audience apparently familiar with every ad-lib.

By pretending to be our idols, we hone our musical skills and shape our identities in an age of vulnerability and experimentation. Everyone does not spend their adolescence singing into a hairbrush in front of the bathroom mirror, but the increased popularity of talent shows and singing contests suggest that a large population identify with those who do. Arguably, broadcasted spectacles such as American Idol capture vividly the phenomenon of white "mainstream" play with black vocal signifiers in recent years. Richard Rischar's (2000; 2004) mentioned work on vocal ornamentation and style in African-American popular ballads of the early 1990s is one of the few contributions to the study of a "mainstreamed" crossover genre

which arguably (through its marketing towards white teenagers) *encourages* white audiences to participate. Although Rischer's focus generally remains in the musical text rather than practices, he does offer some observations on white participation: "What is significant about all these cultural products is that they demonstrated an unapologetic blackness while still enjoying mainstream popularity. That is, even if the material seemed to be about and to address African-Americans, white people felt invited in, too" (2000:2). Perhaps one could suggest, then, that a strong liking for an artist may be experienced as an *invitation* to participate and sing along?

Gunnhild: "My first big heroine was Lauryn Hill. I would start crying *every* time I listened to that CD. So, I've sort of always looked for that sound in my voice, and those phrasings. I think I have had that as an ideal for a long, long time. It just strikes a chord within me. Much more than other things. It gets to my feelings, I guess".

This woman describes an experienced affinity for a voice, an affinity so deep it set her off to search inside her own body for something to participate with in order to enter that sound and become a part of it. Indeed, knowing which possibilities exist "within" us would be difficult if we had no mirrors in which to study our reflection. Through play with vocal identity within a musical stylistic universe, the actual limits of the subject may be expanded. Perhaps may some of the limitations of a white body imposed on us through Western traditions and ideologies (and the stereotypes emerging from them), be transcended. As Simon Frith (1996) proposes, music is both fantastic and real; it is enacted in activity: "music gives us a real experience of what the ideal could be" (274). In a similar sense, musical role models may help us figure out of *who* we may be. One of my informants told about the door-opening experience she had when she heard the singer Tata Vega:

Oda: "She can sing anything! She has all tones of voice and timbre. Wailing, not wailing... it's like: one person – the whole range. And I remember thinking "Ah! This means I can also do anything". Because her being black didn't matter, as long as she also sounds completely "white". You get my point? So I thought: then I can do the exact same thing".

The linguistic concept of performativity⁵⁷ has in recent years become a prominent feature in the broader academic field of performance studies (Loxley 2007:140). Judith Butler is most often credited with effecting this union (ibid.): "In speaking of gender as an act, she draws on the dramatic or theatrical senses of 'act' in order to pursue her case, understanding the 'doing'

⁵⁷ as derived from J. L. Austin's speech act theory

of gender as the dramatization of the body, a matter of ‘ritualized, public performance’”, explains Loxley (2007:141). Although I do not pursue extensively the particularities of these related, theoretical fields, it is obvious that they offer highly valuable perspectives for any consideration of “white appropriation”. In his exploration of Australian gospel performance, Johnson (2003) introduces D. Soyini Madison’s concept of the *performance of possibilities*. Elaborating on this concept, Madison propounds that “[p]erformance becomes the vehicle by which we travel to the worlds of Subjects and enter domains of intersubjectivity that problematize how we categorize who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them’, and how we see ourselves with ‘other’ and different eyes” (Johnson 2003:115). In the beginning of this chapter I discussed how a social reality is created through discursive practices, arguing that our experienced life-world is intimately connected to the language available for describing it. Who ‘we’ are and who ‘they’ are, ultimately depends on the language at hand for dealing with these concepts. We can further influence the meanings of those words by the way we perform them. Through participation in a discursive, musical space, the limits assigned for an identity may be challenged. In other words, the way an individual sings, affects what she can call herself – and in a sense: *who she is*.

Performing the Other, or just her music?

“To call music a performing art, then, is not just to say that we perform it; it is to say that through it we perform social meaning”.

Nicolas Cook (2003:213)

This chapter has been devoted to an exploration of blackness, whiteness, and Norwegianness as discursive, rather than essential, categories. Instead of regarding white play with blackness as cultural appropriation or theft, I have suggested to see transgression of these categories as instances of performative play. Perhaps, for example, the Australian gospel choir finally were able to enter through their own “Gate of Salvation” in a moment of performative transcendence, or liminality. Johnson (2003) applies Conquergood’s concept of “dialogic performance” to show how a liminal condition allows the performer “to know himself or herself by performing the Other”. I have allowed some quotes from my informants to suggest a similar notion: that we become what we sing, and that sometimes we sing or perform *in order to become* something or someone new. In the case of the Australian gospel choir, the mask of Otherness was apparently put on within a limited space and time: going to rehearsal

they consciously entered a framing set for play. In other cases, subjects may experience that what was once a foreign expression becomes “their own”. This way of conceptualizing what happens when “white” people engage in “black” style, regards musical activity as identity play and social strategy. It acknowledges that music is soaked in social significance: the Australian choir’s performance was not simply one of gospel tunes, but one of *blackness*.

In the following chapter I would like to direct a stronger focus towards a *stylistic* conception of blackness in music and vocal style. Is such a conception at all possible if we are not willing to abandon the insight that musical performance is always a performance of social meaning? How, then, do we deal with a singer who wants her voice to sound like a black person’s voice *because she likes the sound of it*, and with little awareness of black music’s historical and social roots? Is there any other way of understanding a “stylistic identity” than as an expression of a socially grounded sense of self? How does the field of Popular Music Studies deal with the problems of separating an aesthetic and a social sphere? And what problems do we walk into if we attempt to generalize, isolate and describe the stylistic features of a “black” vocal style? These are some of the questions I will discuss in the following chapter.

4: Into the groove: Blackness as a metaphor of style

In the previous chapter I discussed how social categories like black, white, and Norwegian are produced and negotiated through discursive practices and musical participation. Refuting the notion of static identities, I described how new spaces for exploring subjectivities take form within the structures of language and music. Music, then, is a mode of social life. But what about the sounds and shapes of music – may they be described on their own terms? Is it possible (or even interesting) to deal with the *sonic* features of a black vocal idiom without considering their social implications? Would such a focus render the musical text empty, void of meaning? And is it at all possible to make generalizations over black vocal styles, without ending up by freezing a dynamic field of multiple, individual practices into one simplistic “genre”? These are some of the problems which will be discussed, quite briefly, in this chapter. Drawing on a concept of *style* as internally consistent systems of signs⁵⁸, I will suggest a notion of “black vocal style” as an “aesthetic universe”, i.e. a certain feel or *groove*, and propose that the concept of “blackness” is sometimes used to describe such an aesthetic universe, functioning as a metaphor of style. First, however, I will begin by considering how the endeavor of approaching music as an aesthetic sphere raises a number of problems within the field of popular music studies.

Rediscovering an aesthetic mode of experience

Addressing some of the major challenges musicology must face when “wrestling with rock”, Walser and McClary (1988) laconically remark on the fact that the intellectual apparatus required of those studying “serious” music is practically non-existent, while “whenever the musicologist of popular music wishes to make the slightest comment on possible relationships between a song and a social context” (284), she has to bring in a whole menagerie of heavy theorists from Adorno to Kristeva to support her assumptions. True as this may be, trying to *detach* certain musics from their social and historical conditions has indeed seemed to represent just as great a taboo in cultural studies over the last few decades. In the case of black music, I have shown that the resistance against such an approach can be massive. From certain positions, aesthetization is perceived as hegemonic practice: a means of emptying

⁵⁸ I.e. a concept derived from structuralist models.

music of its subversive powers in order to co-opt it into the mainstream. In fact, it seems that popular music studies, and particularly the vein concerned with black style, forms a veritable counter-paradigm to anything resembling autonomy aesthetics. An example of such an anti-autonomy position is found in Christopher Small's (1987) *Music of the Common Tongue*, where Small handles black *musicking* primarily as a vehicle of social struggle and a coping mechanism: "above all *useful* to them in their struggle for the most basic of human rights: the right to define for oneself who one is" (Small 1987:134, original italics).

In his article "Check the Technique: Black Urban Culture and the Predicament of Social Science" (1998), Robin D.G. Kelley takes issue with the group of progressive social scientists who in the mid-to-late 1960s insisted that black culture was itself a necessary adaptation to racism and poverty, a set of coping mechanisms that grew out of the struggles for material and psychic survival (42). Kelley shows how a number of scholars in the 1990s returned to or revised the interpretive frameworks developed by that previous generation of ethnographers (54), and points to how the older generation's focus placed the most central motives and outcomes of aesthetic performance off the radar. "Without a concept of, or even an interest in, aesthetics, style, and the visceral pleasures of cultural forms", Kelley writes, he is not surprised that most social scientists explain black expressive forms from *the dozens* to *rap*, or the *cool pose* in general, merely as an oppositional response to racism (54), while "...cool as an aesthetics, as a style, as an art form expressed through language and the body, is simply not dealt with" (46). Summing up, he argues that "Black music, creativity and experimentation in language, that walk, that talk, that style, must be understood as sources of visceral and physic pleasure" (58).

The sociological focus in cultural studies and popular musicology seems to have been gradually replaced by a return to the musical text, employing contextually grounded and poststructuralist modes of interpretation (see Mc Clary; Middleton, Hawkins, et al.). In recent years *the body* has also achieved a greater relevance in the study of how music is perceived and performed. This turn may perhaps provide an answer to Kelley, who solicits a greater appreciation of the physical and aesthetic pleasure derived from black cultural practices. Is it possible to conceptualize *the aesthetic experience* as contextually and socially conditioned, but still as a mode of expression differing significantly from other social behavior in that it is primarily aimed towards *aesthetic pleasure*? How do we speak of an aesthetic mode of experience without falling back into the regime of autonomy aesthetics?

The history of music researchers challenging rigid notions of music as an autonomous sphere has solid roots. Leonard Meyer was in some senses a precursor to the sociolinguist tendency of establishing structural relations between culture and society. In 1956 he explored music as a semiotic system and challenged the notion of autonomy aesthetics by pointing out that even the *absolutist* position (arguing that music's meaning is found within the music itself) presupposes the existence of culturally constructed conventions:

“For without a set of gestures common to the social group, and without common habit responses to those gestures, no communication whatsoever would be possible. Communication depends upon, presupposes, and arises out of the universe of discourse which in the aesthetics of music is called *style*” (Meyer 1956:42, my italics).

Meyer thus proposes an understanding of *style* as a “universe of discourse” where [musical] *gestures* are the constituent signifiers which enable communication. His model seems to afford a notion of style as self-consistent without expelling it to an isolated sphere.

Indeed, to criticize the universalizing claims of an ‘autonomous’ aesthetic sphere does not thereby destroy the specificity of the aesthetic as a category of experience, as Janet Wolff argues (Middleton 1990:256). Important perspectives on the inherent meanings of music continue to enrich a post-autonomous musicological discourse⁵⁹. Richard Middleton (1990) laments what he calls the “rush to interpretation” in semantic analysis, and argues that even in popular music connotation is a *secondary* system of signification (220). “Semantic processes more directly tied to syntactic structure are particularly important in music”, he explains, and adds that “the temptation to skate over this level, often founded on an assumption of the syntactic impoverishment of popular music, should be avoided” (ibid.). Rather, musical scholars should take the time to investigate *primary signification* in music, which may be found in a *structural semantics* implicated in the musical form itself (222). Middleton’s discussion of the “primary significations” of music includes several approaches to the music’s formal and syntactic meanings. One possible path beyond the music/language analogy is pointed out by invoking the connections between the gestural level of music and a certain sensimotorical intelligence (172): the physical, bodily experience of music.

This path has been fruitfully explored by Charles Keil and Stephen Feld, as they depart from the concept of *Music Grooves* (1994). Keil is particularly concerned with how music is experienced and produced in close relation to the body in motion. In his chapter

⁵⁹ See Hawkins 2002:9-10

“Motion and Feeling Through Music”, Keil takes issue with Leonard Meyer’s (1956) lack of appreciation of the body’s part in making sense of music. Feld’s concept of *groove*, on the other hand, is rather based on Meyer’s conceptualization of *style*. Referring to Meyer’s invocation of style as “the universe of discourse within which musical meanings arise” (Meyer 1967:7, quoted in Feld 1994:110), Feld explains that “each culturally constructed “groove” is such a universe (...) Instantly perceived, and often attended by pleasurable sensations ranging from arousal to relaxation, “getting into the groove” describes how a socialized listener anticipates pattern in a style, and feelingfully participates by momentarily tracking and appreciating subtleties vis-à-vis overt regularities” (110-111).

Although it is, according to Middleton, through the internal relationships between musical events that music makes sense on a primary level, these are “linked to other cognitive and affective structurations through the interpretive ‘frames’ that are brought to bear” (1990:222). He also observes that the significations of different styles cannot be separated from the discourses that surround them (ibid.:221). In other words, even primary musical meaning depends not only on cognitive schemes, but on context. Meyer similarly observed that “A musical style is a finite array of interdependent melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, timbral, textural, and formal relationships and processes. When these are internalized as learned habits, listeners (including performers and composers) are able to perceive and understand a composition in the style as an intricate network of implicative relationships, or to experience the work as a complex of felt probabilities” (quoted by Feld 1994:112). “Out of these relationships arise the “expectations – the tendencies – upon which musical meaning is built” (ibid.)”. Feld himself also appreciates the interdependency between groove or style and cultural context: “Styles are engraved and ingrained in cultures the way grooves are engraved and ingrained in record discs” (1994:111).

In other words, although we may address musical style as structurally self-sufficient patterns of meaning, we are not dealing with music in a social vacuum. We are, however, getting at an aesthetic category of experience which is performed and perceived by the body. Such a notion of aesthetics has arguably less to do with the concept of autonomous aesthetics and *l’art pour l’art*, relying on the modern divide between mind and body, than with the

classical concept derived from the Greek “aisthetikos”⁶⁰: the science of how things are known via the senses⁶¹.

⁶⁰ See Online Etymology Dictionary:

<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=aesthetic&searchmode=none>

⁶¹ The field of anthropology notably seems to have experienced a *return to the senses* in recent years: see publications like David Howes (ed.): *The Varieties of Sensory Experience* (1991).

“Blackness” as a metaphor of style

Morten: “In all gospel choirs you know what a black singer is, you know what a *neger* is, you know what they represent musically and you strive towards that”.

Talking to some of my informants I got the impression that their quest for a black sound was, somehow, motivated by sonic preferences rather than identity politics. Morten from my focus group has been quoted several times expressing that the “*neger*” assumed a position as a glorified object among the singers in his gospel choir:

Morten: “(...) And so you do all you can to imitate black sound, and “*neger*”. You use all possible means. All the basic means are employed, like a big vibrato, a strong voice, the chestvoice up higher and higher – *nothing* but the chestvoice, just strain it upwards. And an airy voice quality”.

The way in which he employs the word *neger* may be provocative⁶²: in singular form, “the *neger*” easily comes across as an essentialized quality of blackness, reified as an object or a caricature – one *neger* representing all black people. However, I would like to propose that in this particular context the word points less to a racial stereotype than a musical stereotype, or key metaphor, of a *feeling, sound, or style*: Immediately after invoking the image of the *neger*, Morten gives examples of specific musical parameters identifying this sound: the big vibrato, the chestvoice, the airy voice quality. In this context, the word ‘*neger*’ seems interchangeable with a subjective concept of *musical blackness*.

Øystein: “It is regarded as a quality, you might say, in certain parts of the music scene”.

Øystein, the band member whom I interviewed was a skilled musician working mostly with cover bands that performed contemporary funk and soul music. He would often assess a band’s performance by how “black” it was, considering specific musical parameters which to him were central to “blackness”. My impression was that of a professional musician who was very specific in his aesthetic goals, who knew exactly how he wanted a groove to sound.

⁶² However, this informant was the one who suggested that I might remove the word *neger* from his statements (see chapter 3), as he realized that he was unable not to use the word when reminiscing about his experiences in the gospel choir. In other words, he was aware that the word might be hurtful or provocative. Nevertheless, in his gospel community word *neger* had apparently been perceived as one of honor.

Øystein: “We start laughing when we hear that ‘now we got it right!’”

However, while “sounding black” seemed to be an aesthetic goal in his environment, he was apparently uneasy speaking about how he would work to achieve the sought-after sound:

Øystein: “Of course it is extremely dangerous (livsfarlig) to walk around, as a white musician, saying that you sound ‘black’. Then you’ll make yourself unpopular pretty quickly. (...) At least you shouldn’t claim that you are more ‘black’ than other people”.

”I think most Norwegian musicians have a certain reverence (ærefrykt)... I don’t think any Norwegian musician would say that ‘my thing is blackness’; that would be suicide. At least I personally recognize a code (det ligger en kodeks hos meg) which says that this wouldn’t be a very smart thing to do”.

In my opinion, his reluctance to qualify his own work as “black” did not appear to be motivated by an awareness of “white appropriation” as problematic; it rather seemed like an expression of how attractive he found this quality to be. His invocation of “suicide”, “extremely dangerous” (livsfarlig), “reverence” (ærefrykt) and “code” (kodeks) suggest that he feared this would be regarded as bragging, and provoke sanctions in the professional environment. One of the female vocal students from Staffeldts gate seemed little affected by such a code:

Gunnhild: “I think the black style is very exciting, and when I am free to chose, I often end up doing that. I just think it’s a lot of fun (...) I think there it such a lot of passion (nerve) in it, you know”.

From my own experience as a musician I have observed how environments of like-minded musicians often will develop their own metaphors in order describe certain aesthetical sensibilities which are central for their performance. One might refer to such environments as “communities” which belong to aesthetic universes where specific rules, or codes, apply. The musical qualities which are appreciated within these communities will often not make a lot of sense to aesthetic outsiders – neither will the metaphors employed to name them – but inside an aesthetic universe, negotiation around style takes place both as the musicians play, and as they talk about how they play. In French baroque, *inégalité* is essential for a convincing performance; rappers often emphasize *flow*, and opera singers will discuss endlessly if a colleague has a good *legato* or not. It is necessary to be familiar with the complex codes of a style in order to establish whether a performance succeeds in demonstrating the right sensibility (a performer applying the *inégalité* too strictly is probably more offensive to the aesthetical insiders, than one who plays all the eights evenly), and this uncertainty adds to the importance of the metaphor as a tool of negotiation.

Some metaphors of style assume a key position in an aesthetic domain. One well-known example is Steven Feld's study of how the principle of *dulugu ganalan* ("lift-up-over-sounding") becomes iconic in the cultural production of the Kaluli people of Papua New-Guinea (Feld 1982). The expression describes the Kaluli *acoustemology*, i.e. their "sonic way of being in the world" resulting from the overlapping layers of sound (mainly bird sounds) in the rain forest. *Dulugu ganalan* is not only mirrored in Kaluli cosmology and forms of communication, but it also functions as an aesthetic ideal for the Kaluli's musical production⁶³. In a study of "The Swing and Expression of Salsa", Christopher Washburne (1998) invokes the concept of *dulugu ganalan* in order to explain the central position of *clave*⁶⁴ in salsa. Washburne, who is also a salsa trombonist, describes how the whole band will stop playing if someone "breaks" the clave and goes *cruza*o (1999). The discourse on "having *clave*" among salsa musicians⁶⁵ suggests that the *clave* is not merely the rhythmical timeline pattern of the music; it has become a pivotal stylistic metaphor.

It is my impression that in certain musical environments, the concept of musical "blackness"⁶⁶ may assume a similar function as an aesthetic metaphor. Of course, the meaningful potential of this metaphor is unlimited: who has the authority to establish exactly which musical features it is that make music "black"? Again, this semantic flexibility may itself contribute to making "musical blackness" a central and powerful metaphor: the question is never settled, the concept is always open to negotiation.

Black style as musicological subject

It is tempting to enter the discussion and try to describe this stylistic landscape. Yet, although the title of this thesis refers to the concept of "black vocal style", I have not gotten close to describing in my own words what this "style" *sounds like*; what characterizes the idiom I am referring to. If I were to approach this question in an analytical, musicological fashion, such

⁶³ Feld's classic study belongs to the ethnomusicological field and follows a structuralist tradition after Levi-Strauss: Departing from mythic material, Feld establishes a grand cross-modal homology in a small-scale society in a way that does not correspond with the overall theoretical orientation of this thesis. Still, Feld's study continues to offer insights to popular musicology; particularly, perhaps, in how it deals with *dulugu ganalan* as stylistic and aesthetic metaphor.

⁶⁴ The *clave* is a West-African derived two-part timeline pattern which, with certain variations, pervades most Afro-Caribbean musical forms. For a closer description see for example Washburne 1998:162

⁶⁵ I did a minor fieldwork among salsa dancers and musicians in New York in 2004. In an online interview, Alex Alvear (Conde/*Planetsalsa*) explained that the often heard statement "Ese tipo tiene clave" ("This guy has got clave") implies that "the guy has knowledge of the tradition and complies with the right "feel" that singing or playing appropriately in the style implies".

⁶⁶ The term "black" may be substituted by other expressions with similar connotations: Morten described how his gospel choir referred frequently to the term "neger" when discussing the sound and feel of vocal performances. The discussion of whether or not someone "has got soul" may probably take similar forms.

an account would require a process of delimitation. Considering the enormous impact that African-American expressions have had on the mainstream of popular music worldwide, how do we draw the line between “black” and “white” styles? The *changing* character of style in popular music complicates the matter further. How black do the Rolling Stones sound to a teenager in 2006? Would audiences now and 30 years ago agree who has more “soul” of Diana Ross and Beyoncé Knowles? Also, who decides what is *black enough*?⁶⁷ It seems like the project of delimiting, defining, and describing “black vocal style” is compelled to depend on subjective judgment. Of course, popular musicologists, ethnomusicologists, and cultural analysts have presented models which could be employed⁶⁸. Brackett (1995) considers African-American music as a musicological subject and concludes that there are some widely shared ideas about what constitutes “African-American” music (119). He applies Gates’ (1988) and Floyd’s (1991) concepts of Signifyin(g) to describe different parameters (time-line, harmonics, timbre, etc) in James Brown’s “Superbad”. Longhurst (1995) quotes John Blacking saying that “‘black music’ is that which is recognized and accepted as such by its creators, performers and hearers ... encompassing the music of those who see themselves as black, and whose musics have unifying characteristics which justify their recognition as specific genres: peculiar *patterns of ‘sonic order’*” (130, original italics). “Black style” could also be described drawing on Fabbri’s understanding of socially established *genre rules*⁶⁹. Another way to go about the task might be by employing “interobjective comparison” as laid out by Philip Tagg [1982](2000:83): by “describing music by means of other music”, in other words “establishing consistency of sound events between two or more pieces of music”. These are but a few tools offered by popular musicology for delimiting and analyzing “black vocal style” in terms of its stylistic or musical parameters.

However, my approach to the stylistic details of a black vocal style will not depend on a method which communicates objectivity or produces definitions. In stead of approaching “black vocal style” as an isolated musicological subject, I will continue to explore *subjective notions of black vocal style* in their pertinent contexts. The next chapter will therefore include the bulk of my interview and focus group material, which largely encircles my informants’ descriptions of stylistic details which they perceive as “black” (and “white”). Entering in

⁶⁷ Frith (1996:131) observes, for example, how Chuck Berry and Little Richard blackened up and burlesqued their performance in order to satisfy white expectations.

⁶⁸ I also gave a brief account of some of the most common ways of generalizing and theorizing black stylistic expression in the second chapter.

⁶⁹ Fabbri operates with five categories of rules: formal/technical; semiotic (referring to the ways in which meaning is conveyed); behavioural (gestural rules governing the performance and listening rituals); social/ideological; and commercial/juridical (Frith 1996:91; Brackett 1995:12).

conversation with these descriptions, I contribute with my own perspectives – both explicitly and implicitly. In fact, I am not confident that I would be able to escape my subjective influence even if I did set up a traditionally musicological, analytic scheme. Any concept of black style seems, to some degree, to be built on certain stereotyped assumptions – even a concept which deals with stylistic features. Although I do believe that an aesthetic universe may compel the performer and the listener on its own stylistic, gestural, timbral, and rhythmic terms, the amount of social information conveyed by style is enormous. Stylistic detail and social signification are deeply intertwined. From a certain timbre, vibrato, phrasing and pronunciation one often makes assumptions about a singer's tastes, education, class, geographical and ethnic origin, or at least about how she wishes to present these qualities. The next chapter will explore how these dynamics come to the surface in a conversation about styles and stereotypes.

5. Styles and stereotypes: Conversations on the social significations of sounds

Introduction: the focus group

Four vocal students – Morten, Oda, Mari and Kathrine – all acquaintances of mine, were sitting in my living-room. I had invited them to be my focus group, to spend a number of hours discussing notions of “black vocal style” with a tape recorder running. It was the first “conversation” I had arranged to research for this project, and I was feeling a bit nervous about it all. Would they respond at all to my questions, or would they perhaps feel uncomfortable addressing the problem of what the concept of “vocal blackness” meant to them? Fortunately, I was soon to be surprised by their upfront statements and the many relevant personal experiences and interesting reflections they brought to the conversation. The group had been talking for about half an hour, when Oda suddenly, seemingly out of nothing, came up with an idea. She proposed to sing a song, Gershwin’s “Summertime” in a “white” and then a “black” manner:

”Ok, here goes! The white version first!”, she announces eagerly. We are shuffling in our seats, curious to hear what she will come up with, and excited by the spontaneity of the event. Some nervous laughter can be heard from the tape, then silence as Oda composes herself and clears her throat in order to begin her demonstration. We focus in on the sound of her voice and her expressive face. Oda starts singing.

Summertime... and the living is easy...

She does not, to my judgement, make a parody out of the performance. However, she seems to be highly conscious of her musical choices as she carefully elaborates every sound of every phrase. In the “white version” she generally does this by means of *isolating* the singular sounds which compose every word. As Oda proceeds to her “black” version of “Summertime”, we are immediately presented to a fuller and more resonant version of her voice. An uninterrupted airflow provides the phrases with a legato quality. Retrospectively, this makes her “white” interpretation appear drier, less voluptuous, in my ears. She also fashions her vibrato differently. There is *more* of it in her black version, and it generally pulls the pitch slightly upwards, or encircles the pitch. Like the “white” version, the “black” version does not appear as a parody or impersonation in my ears. The singer merely performs in a

different idiom, with a stylistic cleverness which I find quite impressive, yet with artistic presence⁷⁰. I will leave further descriptions of her performance to the focus group whose discussion will be quoted throughout this chapter.

I describe this situation at length because Oda's performance provided the group with wonderful illustrative material which opened up the discussion of *specific musical details* as signifiers of blackness, whiteness, and/or Norwegianness. This chapter is mainly built around statements from the focus group conversation and my other interviews. I have organized the interview material around some overarching themes, and as I analyze the statements I will attempt to situate them in relevant contexts and place them in dialogue with other texts from my data archive. Of course I also enter in this conversation with my subjective interpretations. As it turns out, not only the transcribed statements from the informal space of the focus group, but also scholarly approaches to the social bearings of music and style seem hard to separate from popular notions and stereotypes. By organizing the statements on black style under headlines like "Emotional Presence", I do not intend to establish that emotional presence is a "typical feature of black style". In the course of this chapter I rather hope to show how the significations of "black" and "white" vocal style are often subjectively established, and how they also rely on myths and stereotypes. Nonetheless, they are perceived as meaningful, and interpretive descriptions of music may be one way of producing a social reality.

I opened chapter 3 by discussing how musical and social categories are negotiated discursively: how we construct and transcend categories like "white", "black" and "Norwegian" when we talk about, and participate in, musical practices. In chapter 4 I introduced the possibility of regarding a concept like "blackness" as a metaphor of musical style. In this chapter, I wish to zoom in partly on the constituents of style, namely musical details, and examine their potential for signification. I work from the assumption that musical style is itself a discourse; an extended, meaningful text. My focus group conversation turned out to support this assumption: spangled with vocal illustrations, it was a conversation where words were often substituted by sounds. As Oda performed her versions of "black" and "white" style, she was actively participating in a verbal discussion and addressing specific ideas which had been discussed – but her comment was formulated as music. With sound, voice, timbre, vibrato, attacks, phrasing, timbre, accentuation, pronunciation, pitch treatment, grimacing, and body posture she was telling a story of a Norwegian cultural climate and its social codes, of cultural hierarchies, of assumptions regarding the black and the white body,

⁷⁰ A quality which, of course, must be established by the subjective listener (in this case me).

of pleasure, of “beauty”, of moral codes and art ideologies, of style, of her own personal experiences, childhood, and professional development, of gender, of shame and of freedom. Musical detail is dense with social information; it is part of the meaningful discourse which constitutes our life-world, and in this chapter I hope to disentangle some of it.

Oda’s idea of singing “Summertime” in a both a “white” and a “black” manner was interesting in another sense: it demonstrated how *relationally* socio-musical meaning is established. It seemed difficult to discuss vocal blackness without outlining and exploring that which it poses itself against. This underscores how the dynamics between the western concepts of blackness and whiteness are in their nature a relationship between a Self and an Other. The focus group’s discussion, and this chapter, thus assumed a dialogic form, where notions and stereotypes of both “black” and “white” vocal style were explored and compared continuously.

Black and white in contrast

Whiteness = “Jazz in Oslo”

The group’s ensuing exploration of her “white” performance turned out to be something of an anti-hegemonic exercise, as it brought out the concept of “whiteness” as the counterpart against which “blackness” is defined, and forced the focus group to examine its features. The concept of musical whiteness is less often named; it rather assumes the position of invisible normality⁷¹. I think this exercise also raised our awareness of how problematic it is in the first place to categorize music along lines such as “black” or “white”. Trying to pigeonhole vocal whiteness will probably appear to be an absurd project to most white, Norwegian singers. Also, the stereotype of whiteness one resorts to when forced to construct a simple image, may even generate in the subject a feeling of alienation and self-exotization.

Morten: “But when we talk about white we are actually addressing this very local phenomenon at the Norwegian Academy of Music...”

Oda&Mari: “Yes, ‘jazz in Oslo’”

⁷¹ In his polemic “Open Letter” (1989), Philip Tagg argues that the term “‘Black Music’ is much more common than ‘white music’; just like the terms ‘women’s history’ or ‘women’s music’ cause fewer eyebrows to be raised than ‘men’s history’ or ‘men’s music’... they (blacks and women) are the exception and we (whites and men) rule. They need proof of identity, we do not” (286).

As the focus group expresses here, there is also a huge problem of *delimitation* which became evident as they turned their focus to whiteness. What musical expressions did their concept of “white vocal style” refer to in this particular conversation? It seemed that the “white style” my informants addressed was conditioned by their position as vocal students at the music academy. Their conceptualization of a “white style” gravitated towards a certain stylistic and ideological orientation in Norwegian jazz vocals, shaped by influential performers and pedagogues within the field. This specific “school” – with its slight *high art*-orientation – may be said to contrast other ideological and stylistic approaches to singing with stronger links to entertainment jazz and contemporary popular music. In the course of this chapter, I will attempt to shed some light on these distinctions, and on how notions of high and low culture arguably feed into the discourse on musical whiteness and blackness. It is difficult to approach notions of “race” in music without also checking the radar for dynamics of class and gender; at times these notions intersect in such a complex manner they are virtually impossible to separate.

After Oda had performed her sample of “white vocal style”, the rest of the group interpreted and discussed the performance with her.

Mari: “In the first version, you were very conscious about the notes, you chose them. [You demonstrated a] “jazz orientation” the sense that one should always present something new; choose other notes than one probably would do spontaneously”.

Oda: “I don’t know if I got it across, but I wanted it to be dryer, cleaner, more distinct, with clearer beginnings and endings, and “tasting” the words”.

Oda says she intended her “white” version to be “dryer” and “cleaner”. The description seems to point implicitly to a human processing of earthly material, transforming the “wet and messy” into a distinct and cultivated result. Although she invokes “tasting”, which indeed is an act of entering in a sensuous experience, it seems plausible from her statement that this fashion of tasting is less related to voluptuous gorging than to the contemplative and analytical method, and nearly *intellectualized* enjoyment, of a wine expert examining a fine claret.

It is difficult not to see her performance, and the ensuing interpretations of it, as influenced by commonly established stereotypes of Western or European modernity. As in the case of black music, it seems that such myths are part of the discourse through which we make sense of music. And the stereotypes may even influence musical performance and artistic choices, because they inform our perception of cultural identity. However, when

adjectives like “cynical”, “cool” (kjølig⁷²) and “explorative” (utforskende) are used by the focus group to describe Oda’s performance of whiteness, one starts to wonder where identification ends and alienation begins. Although these qualifiers point quite adequately to the disinterested involvement pertinent to modern, European art ideology, this Europeanness⁷³ represents a foreign character (or perhaps an Other).

Kathrine: “That way of ”tasting”, and using all the sounds, I think that has become more and more common in the white [way of singing]. But they do it maybe more distinctly [than those performing in a “black” style] and with less of the large mouth, open resonance, vibrato and so on. And isolating sounds”.

Oda: “Yes, and I think it’s cool (kult⁷⁴)! It is ‘nerding’!”

Mari: “That is what I thought too. All the notes were like ‘ok, now I will try to explore something else, and do something that... Always a new twist, now I have to present something new’”.

Mari recognizes in Oda’s performance an impulse to constantly reinvent her musical expression, and perceives this renewal as consciously and cleverly crafted rather than spontaneous. She describes it as a “jazz orientation” (jazztilnærming). In other words, stereotypes of a European identity were hardly the only source for the group’s understanding of white style. As the focus group pointed out themselves, their descriptions of vocal whiteness were informed by certain vocal practices within a Norwegian jazz scene. In order to explain which vocal practices I am attempting to refer to here, I will allow for some brief background and some tentative generalizations on the Norwegian jazz scene.

Destabilization and hierarchy in Norwegian jazz

In a recent article on the *Belonging* Quartet and the historization of new jazz in Norway, Odd Skårberg (2007) describes how central musicians like Karin Krogh, Jan Garbarek, Terje Rypdal, Jon Christensen, and Arild Andersen contributed to a “*destabilization of jazz*” which “should be regarded in light of what is often referred to as a “Europeanization” of the

⁷² The Norwegian word ‘kjølig’ translates as ‘cool’ or ‘cold’. The term may be used as a metaphor describing something “composed”, “unaffected”, or “calculated”, but does still not connote anything like “hip” or “streetsmart”.

⁷³ Philip Tagg argues that when “white music” is used as an opposite pole to “black music”, it often refers to a distorted image of European music whose “*implied* meaning coincides with the most reactionary, elitist, bourgeois, conservative and non-dynamic view of European music imaginable” (1989:292).

⁷⁴ The Norwegian slang term ‘kul’ translates similarly as the English slang term ‘cool’. It is often used interchangeably with ‘fun’ or to describe something generally nice, positive or sympathetic.

American jazz tradition” (Skårberg 2007:169, my translation⁷⁵). Skårberg explains how these musicians all entered the scene in the 1960s and shared an open musical attitude, allowing for musical currents from both inside and outside the conventional limits of jazz to influence their practice, such as folk music, art music, free jazz and rock. He also underscores that they also represent individual, creative voices. The orientation away from standardized conventions of the genre coincided with a transition from the entertainment business to the art sphere. When jazz in the mid-1960s experienced an increased marginalization in the pop charts and nightclubs, the NGO *Norwegian Jazz Forum* worked to establish a new scene for jazz in concert settings⁷⁶.

Perhaps the “Europeanized” jazz tradition could also be called a “whiter” tradition, its discursive and musical signifying on art music and European folk music considered. As Jan Garbarek recalls a live version of “Autumn Leaves” with Keith Jarrett, Charles Lloyd and Jack DeJohnette, he explains how Jarrett’s improvisations went “all the way from Bach to Penderecki” (Skårberg 2007:182, my translation). At this occasion, if one should put it a bit crudely, it seems like “*all the way*” was a fairly short drive in central Europe (though covering a notably longer stretch of time) through a landscape of modernity and progress, intellectual minds, spiritual transcendence, sublime nature and European folklore. In Norway, with the “Belonging” quartet’s legendary ECM recordings from the 1970s as its groundwater, a vein of lyric and occasionally melancholic instrumental jazz is sometimes popularly referred to as *ffjelljazz*; “mountain jazz”, similarly evoking connotations of Norwegian nature.

What have been the outcomes of such a recontextualization of jazz in Norway? In an MA thesis⁷⁷ on social divides in the Norwegian jazz sector, jazz pianist Anders Aarum (2003) alleges that Norwegian cultural politics maintain a cultural hierarchy within the jazz sector. When public funding of jazz is distributed, he argues, this is done quite predictably in accordance with conventions creating “social divides, segregation and rivalry between certain genres and actors within the jazz sector. The greatest social divide may be found between the traditional genres and the more experimental or innovative (nyskapende) genres” (105, my translation)⁷⁸.

⁷⁵ All quotations from Skårberg’s article have here been translated by me.

⁷⁶ A process described briefly at www.karinkrog.no. Karin Krog was the first chairman of the Norwegian Jazz Forum.

⁷⁷ Although this source may not represent a large academic authority, I find it to be an interesting account from the perspective of a performing musician from a younger generation.

⁷⁸ All quotations from Aarum’s thesis have here been translated by me.

According to Aarum, the jazz festivals also contribute to maintaining this hierarchy: The festivals regularly commission compositions from jazz musicians, and being trusted with this task is considered a great recognition of the composer's work. It also contributes to increasing her status further. "Among the Norwegian jazz musicians it is first and foremost those who perform in the genres modern nordic jazz, electronica and jazz inspired by traditional Norwegian (folk) music who receive the majority of these commissionings" (92). He mentions former festival composers such as Nils Petter Molvær, Arild Andersen, Erlend Skomsvoll, Terje Isungset, Sidsel Endresen, Jon Balke, Terje Rypdal, and Jan Garbarek as examples of this tendency. Aarum also reflects on whether the major *form* of these commissioned compositions may be a conscious attempt to push the genres even closer to the compositional forms of the European classical tradition.

While the genres mentioned above are considered to be innovative, Aarum expounds that "genres such as 'trad' (traditional jazz standards), swing and mainstream are regarded as sentimental and reactionary by parts of the jazz sector and not least by the institutions" (97). He takes issue with this opinion, and argues that innovation may just as well take the form of a reinterpretation of the tradition as "coming up with the newest ideas within new music" (ibid.). Although Aarum's point of view is academically presented, it is perhaps most interesting as a personal testimony from an active musician working within the socio-musical landscape of jazz in Norway.

Of course, the Norwegian jazz field is diverse, and, all things considered, quite small – in other words it is hard to generalize and divide it into distinct territories. But Aarum's testimony underpins Skårberg's description of how central groupings have gradually distanced themselves from American traditions, and adds to the picture that these branches have achieved the highest cultural status and recognition on our national jazz scene. His contention that *status* (or symbolic capital) is a significant parameter in the assessment of different aesthetic orientations in Norwegian jazz, provides a relevant perspective to my conversation with the focus group. Do my informants relate to some *aesthetic normativity* when they discuss "black" and "white" style and conceptualize "white" style as an investigating and innovative "jazz approach"?

In the case of vocalists, important voices within the Norwegian jazz scene have during the last decades promoted a sound-oriented and almost instrumental approach to vocal expression. The newspaper article "Den kvinnelige jazzminoritet" ("The female jazz minority") (Strand 2006) comments on how prominent female vocalists such as Sidsel

Endresen and Elbjørg Raknes stand out as instrumentalists rather than vocalists (“syngedamer”, literally and derogatively “singing ladies”) by creating new forms of vocal expression and by foregrounding improvisation. In 2004, Endresen explained to me in a radio interview how she worked on the album “Merriwinckle”⁷⁹, where the music is fully improvised, and Endresen’s “language” consists of word-like sounds:

“I want to eliminate as many features of the human voice as possible, and try to become as clinical, that is, sound-oriented, as possible”.

She also explained that in this project she “wanted the voice to become a synthesizer”. As to the language-like sounds she used, she said that they did not “pass through the frontal lobe” and that she was often surprised herself by the “words” that came from her mouth. Endresen and Wallumrød had decided to avoid using traditional lyrics in this project, as they “became a filter” and might “stand in the way of the music”.

Along with other influential pedagogues, Endresen contributes to passing a vocal ideology on to new generations of jazz vocalists. This approach to singing is arguably based on criteria common to a modern art ideology, like a strong emphasis on authenticity (finding the real voice within the voice) and in some cases a movement towards absolute music (instrumental, sound-oriented, and less dependent on words and social meanings). This may be seen as an conquest of traditionally male territory. When some vocalists during the last decade have directed their attention to operating electronic effect boxes while they perform⁸⁰, rather than addressing the audience from center stage, this may be an important strategy defying the marginalization of female agency in jazz which Aarum’s list of former festival composers so clearly spelled out: Between its establishment in 1979 and 2004, only 22 of the 198 graduates from the country’s foremost jazz education (in Trondheim) were women. And among these, 16 were vocalists (Strand 2006).

However, the relationship between the vocal styles which enjoy a high status in cultural hierarchies (as described by Aarum) and those which are less highly regarded by critics and artists, is of course more complex than what this crude account is able to convey. As traditional genre divides are largely dissolving, the divide between the social spheres of “jazz” and “pop” is probably less significant in a stylistic sense than in a *qualitative* sense: It may seem that a “jazz singer” is a singer who is taken seriously by jazz critics because she

⁷⁹ In 2004 I conducted a radio interview for the University of Oslo campus radio (Radio Nova) with Sidsel Endresen (vocals) and Christian Wallumrød (keyboards) in relation to their album release. The quotations have been translated by me.

⁸⁰ Dickinson (2004:172-173) argues that “women are usually held to be more instinctive and pre-technological, further away from harnessing the powers of machinery (musically and elsewhere) than men”, and describes Cher’s “pointing out the computer mediation of her voice” in the dance hit “Believe” as “potentially liberating”.

communicates musical consciousness and innovation at some level, although her stylistic expression gets little from improvised music and more from popular music. This can, ironically, be regarded as a result of what Skårberg called the *destabilization of jazz* which opened the genre to new influences in the 1960s: in recent years the jazz field is perhaps reopening itself to *less* experimental expressions. Vocal students at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo do not study “jazz vocals”; they study “rhythmic vocals” and choose among their influences what stylistic expression to develop. Among the three rhythmic students in my focus group (the fourth studied a classical repertoire), one worked mainly with a country pop band, another wrote singer/songwriter material and worked as a soloist with big bands, and the third had a more improvising expression but still showed strong soul/pop influences. All three were composers and band leaders, and signaled a reflexive and professional consciousness about their work.

This rough outline of some tendencies within Norwegian jazz may (despite its subjective and insufficient character) be a helpful background for understanding my focus group’s descriptions of a “white” style. In fact, their conceptualization of “whiteness” seems to rely as much on distinctions between art music and pop music, strategies related to gender dynamics, and a generational breach, as on the notion of “blackness”.

“The Norwegian way of being”

Above I have examined my focus group’s descriptions of a “white” vocal style as an instrumental and intellectual attitude to vocal performance, as oriented towards modern art ideologies, and as a movement away from female stereotypes. How do these features relate to the concept of whiteness, and is it possible that they also signify on “Norwegianness”? I discussed in chapter 3 some of the dynamics between discursive categories such as “white” and “Norwegian”, which often play into one another and sometimes (but not always) conflate. It might be useful, then, to visit some of the existing analytical approaches to *Norwegian* style and “ways of being”. This might help the inquiry into what “vocal whiteness” might signify in a Norwegian context.

Sissel Kyrkjebø is undoubtedly the Norwegian singer who most openly has drawn her symbolic strength from signifiers of “Norwegianness”. Media theorist Kate Augestad has focused on the singer and media phenomenon Kyrkjebø through several studies, and shows how she became an icon of “Norwegianness” by affiliating herself with symbols like the *bunad* (national costume) and virginal nature. The songbird from the Western fjords had her

first major public appearance in the international finals of the Eurovision Song Contest in 1986, when this was hosted in Bergen, Norway. A virtual incarnation of our most romantic national myths, the young woman became subject, during the following years, to a popular idolization which demonstrated how traditional the ideal images of *Norwegianness* remained in the late 20th century. The artist Sissel Kyrkjebø did not, however, signify on “Norwegianness” simply by surrounding herself with Norwegian symbols in photographs and lyrics. Augestad [1995](2002) describes how the unspoiled “natural beauty” of Kyrkjebø’s voice itself pulled semantically in the same direction. “The voice is the point of departure for her unsurpassed position both in the music business and in ‘the deep of the Norwegian *volksgeist*’” (2002:205, my translation, italics added). “When one listens to the free, unstrained manner in which Sissel sings, her voice appears to be a natural voice and she appears to be a natural talent. To a Norwegian performer, naturalness is a particularly significant quality, because concepts of nature are among the most important and fundamental constituents of Norwegianness” (ibid.:215).

How might this relate to the notions of vocal whiteness discussed above? How does innovation, dryness, and clarity relate to natural innocence? My focus group’s conceptualizations of style may refer to different, but related notions of the “Norwegian”. If you ask a Norwegian what is “typically Norwegian”, he might not automatically associate to fjords and mountains. Other clichés are just as common when Norwegians negotiate, contest and reestablish their collective identity through discursive practices – like, say, the statement that “Norwegians are afraid to show their feelings publicly”. If Sissel Kyrkjebø’s unspoilt and beautiful voice is able to connote a romantic image of a country rendered innocent by its wild nature, then an emotionally contained vocal style may perhaps embody another Norwegian myth? In 1984 the anthropologist Arne Martin Klausen edited an anthology called *Den norske væremåten* (*The Norwegian Way of Being*) where several anthropologists explored typically Norwegian cultural traits, aptly acknowledging that cultural forms and identities are created continually by human beings in social interaction, and not inherited (Klausen 1984:8). One of the writers was Tord Larsen, who reflected over deeply embedded Norwegian peculiarities drawing on a rich array of sources spanning from literature, everyday conversation and politics. Among others who have analyzed “typically Norwegian” codes and attitudes in everyday life, are anthropologist Marianne Gullestad and “gonzo-sociologist” Kjetil Rolness. Their case studies span from smalltalk to housewives’ communities, interior design and decoration. Later on I will draw on some of their observations, assuming that they may shed light on Norwegian vocal practices as well.

I have certain reservations against using this type of cultural analyses. One objection lies in the transition which the Norwegian cultural realm seems to have undergone since the 1980s, experiencing the impact of an increasing diversification and globalization⁸¹. Although local and national specificities are not dissolving as such, young people in Norway are less confined to them and may find their influences in other cultures (as was discussed in chapter 3). “Qualitative researchers should also be wary of conferring determinative powers upon aspects of context”, Holstein and Gubrium (2004:309) remind us, and this speaks precisely to the acknowledgement of individual agency in a changing society. Another problem lies in the fact that such analyses not only emerge from, and contribute to enforce, simple stereotypes, but they have also become clichés to which Norwegians relate *reflexively*: most Norwegians have heard themselves repeat the doxa that “Norwegians are no good at smalltalk”. In other words, the discourse may contribute to the practice. However, and indeed for that very reason, it seems relevant to pursue this track: The project of my thesis lies largely in visiting popular notions like these, which circulate as worn phrases, tacit assumptions, and interpretive frames.

Emotional presence and cynicism

Morten: “It was exciting to see how you worked, because you were emotionally present in the second version [the “black”], and cynical in the first [the “white”].

Oda: “Really, did you think that!”

To Oda’s apparent surprise, Morten interpreted her first version of “Summertime” as “cynical”. This was probably just another way of experiencing her clever choice of notes and experimental manner of isolating phonemes. It may appear “cynical” if a singer does not seem to give herself up to the song, does not really let the flow and the emotion take over. Her “black” performance, on the other hand, was by Morten described as “emotionally present”. Oda and Morten both grew up singing gospel in choirs, and they both associated a black musical expression with a strong emotionality – both in the sense of emotional display, and the experience of emotional and religious commitment.

Oda: “I relate some of the [black] expression with a kind of religious dedication – letting go of all inhibitions both emotionally and aesthetically in a way, scream, howl, cry while you’re singing. All effects appealing to emotion are allowed”.

⁸¹ Let me underscore that Gullestad (1989) hardly can be criticized of not acknowledging the dynamic character of the Norwegian society.

Oda: “(...) and it is an aesthetics where it is allowed to sing heartfelt (inderlig), and where it’s ok to... there is a greater tolerance towards things that may be perceived as syrupy/tacky (klissete) in other genres”.

Morten: “That is very true!”

Morten and Oda agree that there is greater room for an explicit emotionality in what they perceive as a black musical tradition than in other genres. Strong outbursts of emotion, such as screaming or crying, are “allowed”. So is the expression of intimate, perhaps even sentimental feelings (“inderlighet”). And it is ok to use “effects” to communicate these affections. From these statements, one may glimpse the outline of a normativity; a different set of rules which non-black singers would *normally* find themselves confined to, and from which the black expressive mode gives dispensation. This non-black normativity (where it is *not* “allowed” to display strong emotions in vocal performance) may be understood as a Norwegian cultural context, or it may be interpreted as the genre rules of a vocal jazz style looking to part with sentimental traditions. In some contexts, it may also be a *male* normativity: The term “klissete” (sticky-and-sweet; tacky; syrupy) – which describes a performance that is perceived as emotional to an uncomfortable, or even embarrassing degree – is definitely laced with feminine connotations.

Morten shared with us a personal experience of breaking with such a normativity in the wrong setting, and experiencing sanctions in the form of an authority’s disapproval. This story is from his first singing lesson with a renowned Norwegian vocalist:

Morten: “I was singing a few songs for her in our first class, so she could get to know me and my style. At that time, I remember feeling that I was really *into* the style, that it was *my way of singing*, and thinking that “she probably likes what I am doing now”. [Laughter from rest of the group]

“But it didn’t “hit home” at all. I think the ideals are simply too different, and that she leans more towards the other ideal. Which is for instance that you should hit directly onto the note [as opposed to sliding onto it from a different pitch]. And that you shouldn’t use too much dynamics within a song, and not imitate emotions and sound like you are crying or in extasy. Rather not. While in a gospel tradition, you rather *should*. Her aesthetics is slightly different from a black aesthetics”.

The “flinkis” complex: shabby or slick?

Oda: “I was wondering: do you think of Take 6 as black or white music? Because it’s so perfected; everything is perfect and produced and smooth”.

It may seem strange to question the “blackness” of this famous all-black American vocal group and their mostly religious *gospel-jazz-soul-r&b* style music. However, what prompted

Oda's question was the sudden thought that their sound was almost too "perfect" to be "black"⁸². This implies, then, that musical "blackness" may sometimes be ascribed to a lack of uptight perfection, a natural and unprocessed expression. The uncensored and immediate emotionality discussed above, similarly speaks to the idea that blackness embodies a shabby authenticity.

Øystein: "It is as accurate as brain surgery".

Øystein, on the other hand, seemed to emphasize quite opposite qualities as the pivotal hallmarks of blackness. A groove which was really black, he said, had to be "*as accurate as brain surgery*". As an active musician playing with pop artists in the soul/funk genres, as well as several "cover bands" performing in certain clubs and at private parties, his musical practice was mainly based in the African-American musical universe. I also knew him to use the concept of "blackness" very actively in his communication about music.

Øystein emphasized *complexity* and technical skills as central to "musical blackness", and as untypical of a "white" or "Norwegian" musicality. In our conversation, he explained why he thought the soul artist John Legend had recently become so popular in Norway⁸³. The reason was, in his opinion, that his accompaniments were "easy to understand":

Øystein: "I see it as a "stripped down" version of blackness, so to speak – it's "whitened" ("forhvita"), and maybe not so funky".

"Soul or no soul; that is the question. In the outset, I am very skeptical towards artists who try to compensate for a lack of imagination by wearing bling, dressing like pimps or putting band-aids on their cheek. The same goes for vocalists who think that "singing" is a type of rhythmic gymnastics and "studio" is another word for lubricant. John Legend is not this type of artists".
(Aalbu, www.groove.no 2 February, 2005)

Much to the annoyance of this critic, it seems, many contemporary black artists choose to dedicate themselves to innovative studio production and elaborate vocal performance rather than embodying the exotic myth of blackness as unprocessed nature. Even neosoul artists such as Erykah Badu and D'Angelo, who communicate an organic authenticity both in music and visual as well as verbal representation, rely on *state of the art* sound production. Not to

⁸² She may have been thinking of the vocal style of the earlier albums, before the group started using beatboxing, programming and even a band in regular pop-chart r&b recordings: The vocal technique required to successfully perform close jazz harmonies a cappella allows for less vibrato and, naturally, less individual freedom to play with pitch and rhythm. Although the style is historically rooted in black traditions, with gospel and do-wop as the most important sources, the jazz harmonies and the straightness of the vocal may seem too smooth and sophisticated to qualify as "black".

⁸³ After John Legend released his album *Get Lifted* in 2005, he became what is called a *norgesvenn*, a "friend of Norway", returning repeatedly to play live concerts. In general, soul artists (whether from Norway or abroad) have problems "breaking big" in the Norwegian market.

mention the glossy productions and polished surface of most contemporary r&b. What is more, virtuoso, melismatic vocal performances are a central feature of soul and r&b.

However, Øystein makes sure to point out that to him, the skills are in themselves no objective – they are just necessary in order to achieve the right feel. The accuracy is not what turns him on, but accuracy *makes it groove*.

Øystein: “Norway is filled to the brim with rock bands. But those guys who are interested in studying their instrument, they go for soul and r&b. Not *because* it is virtuoso, but because the virtuoso is cool, if you know what I mean. Those people who sit down and practice 4 hours a day, they are not so hung up on play punk music. (...) It’s intricate and it has more groove; it is very groovy”.

Here, Øystein construes his outspoken, black musical orientation by establishing a distance to rock bands (i.e. the guys who are *not* interested in “studying their instruments”). This points to a significant discursive relationship in the Norwegian context: one concept of “blackness” becomes legible by its opposition to the rock scene.

Kaja: “In all the years before there have been a lot of that ‘*flinkis*’-*funk-soul-westcoast-stuff*”.

In my interview with the three female vocal students from the Christian college *Staffeldtsgate* in Oslo, I asked the group to outline the musical profile of their school. I think this informant’s creatively merged musical category managed to draw a very illustrative line along a central axis of the Norwegian popular music scene. The first word, “flinkis”, would have said it all to someone with the adequate member’s knowledge, but she conveniently spelled out its often unspoken contents. Jamming funk, soul and westcoast into the same box, and throwing “that stuff” on top, she gives a good example of how the term “flinkis” is often employed.

Flinkis derives from *flink*, which means skillful or good. To call a musician “flinkis” implies that he puts much importance in technical mastership, but also that he flaunts his skills (and implicitly: that this is all he has to show for himself)⁸⁴. The same can be said about a band, or a genre (like soul music deprived of *soul*). “Flinkis” is a metaphor for a certain attitude to music, and it is normally used quite derogatory to signal skepticism towards other cultural strata than one’s own: Like a disguised bourgeois mocking of lower classes’ work

⁸⁴ In his MA thesis, Håvard Gravdal (2001:55-61) explores the implications of *flinkhet* (cleverness, aptness, skillfulness) in musical identities, also providing a discussion of the slang term *flinkis*. Gravdal’s discussion touches on some the same ideas as my own, and he invokes examples like Sting, Peter Gabriel, Anne Vada, Toto, and Steely Dan. There are, however, some who use the term “flinkis” in a more neutral manner, meaning simply “flink” (i.e. skilful, clever).

ethics, calling someone “flinkis” is a way of marking distinction, a demonstration of the “superior taste” which redeems the privileged subject from hard labor⁸⁵. Therefore it is not only an aesthetic distinction, but also a social one. The term is often used by rock audiences and critics about session musicians and bands who play westcoast, funk/fusion and slick soul and r&b (in my experience, a considerable number of these musicians in Norway comes out of Christian environments and gospel choirs). Among the Norwegian bands that have most frequently been honored with the title, are *Lava* (Toto-like westcoast from the 1980s)⁸⁶ and *D’sound* (acid jazz/funky pop from the 1990s). Add to that the bands that perform funky covers in the Oslo nightclub “Smuget”, and several bands from the Pentecost church and other Christian societies. All in all it may seem that white, Norwegian instrumentalists who play in black contemporary genres (except hip hop) risk being called “flinkis”.

A rockist consensus?

Naturally, for an aspiring band to be written off by critics as “flinkis”, and thus declared devoid of any real musical interest can be a frustrating experience. *Baba Nation* vocalist Erik Røe⁸⁷ complains in an interview (Riesto 2004) about some biased critique he has received from: “...the camp who hates me, the “cred crew” in Oslo who also hated Baba”.

Journalist: “It was always love or hate with you guys?”

Erik Røe: “Many people were provoked by Baba Nation, by the fact that we were very extroverted and had our musical references from the USA. In that regard it has been interesting to follow the media debate on *flinkis*/westcoast music this fall. Look straight down on the floor and play some ironic rock, then you’re a gloomy indie rocker with the right to live. The music business makes me throw up, and I would rather not be a part of it. I just want to get out there and play” (Riesto 2008, my translation).

Who is this judgemental mob that Røe refers to as the “music business”, who decides that bands ought to stare gloomily into the floor rather than put on a show for the crowd? Well, there are inevitably some opposing fronts in the field of popular music, and Røe apparently points to a much discussed consensus among important critics and opinion leaders.

⁸⁵This point draws on Bourdieu’s observation of the pragmatic (and i.e. not completely arbitrary) taste of the lower classes (Bourdieu [1979] 1986:376-378): If the elite’s value is not measured by its workforce, it does not need to show craftsmanship in order to be taken seriously. The cultural elite may thus mark distinction to the less privileged classes by avoiding their “pragmatic” taste. While, as Carl Wilson (2007:69) observes, “for anyone with normal aspirations to get ahead, even modestly, the choice in the “artier” side of popular music not to play or sing obviously well can be just as unfathomable: most performers can’t “afford” to make that decision, figuratively or literally”.

⁸⁶“The ”flinkis” band Toto has been a favourite hate object in politically correct music circles for over 20 years”, wrote music journalist Håkon Moslet in *Dagbladet* (Moslet 1999)

⁸⁷Who was also cited in chapter 3.

“American r&b is in a pitiful condition these days. Almost everything that is produced, is syrupy, stereotyped and soulless”, complained one rock critic⁸⁸. “Soul music at its best should be a little unsteady, rush a little to hastily in an untidy trot, and thereby surprise with deeply felt *soul*”, declared another⁸⁹. In the article “Kunsten, ‘negeren’ og rockejournalisten” (2003a), journalist and musician Ole-Martin Ihle surveyed Norwegian rock journalism from the 1980s to 2003, and argued that it has a tendency which might be called a Norwegian brand of *rockism*⁹⁰: As the quotes above suggest, even contemporary r&b is often subjected to rock’s romantic, primitivist art ideology and authenticity cult when assessed by music critics. Ihle argues that this leads to a devaluation of contemporary, commercially and musically innovative black genres which do not honor the rock critics’ moral-aesthetic code.

”Nobody would claim that it is an aesthetic pleasure to attend an Iggy Pop concert. But still there is something so basal in what he expresses, something which does *not* have anything to do with (...) listening to a beautiful classical theme in a concert hall; but it’s about getting a hard fist in your face to remind you that life has those sides, too. It’s a part of it, and it has to be brutal and ugly in order to be good. And at the same time, it can be a an art experience (Tor Marcussen, quoted in Ihle 2003a:94).

“[Craig]David doesn’t run particularly deep. A beautiful and cool front figure who effectively and comfortably lulled [the fans] into a rosy red dreamland with his sugar-coated songs” (Espen A Hansen, quoted in Ihle 2003a:93).

Apparently, popular music shouldn’t be about pleasure, at least not if it is to be taken seriously by Norwegian rock critics, Ihle argues polemically. The same applies for black music: “This is as much a question of a romantic concept of the “*negro*”, as it is a question of a romantic concept of *art*. To the [Norwegian] rock critics, black artists should express the discomfort of being, and only let *the blues* take away the pain for a moment or two. “Negroes” should for ever remain “negroes”. And they only become “negroes” when we get to feel sorry for them and feel a little bad about ourselves. That is why some people are less enthusiastic about black artists who have slackened up their blues” (ibid.:92).

Another successful strategy in order to be canonized in the music press is showing autonomy by signaling a large distance to the music business. The alternative rock band “The

⁸⁸ Espen A. Hansen, quoted in Ihle 2003a:90. All quotations from Ihle 2003 have been translated by me.

⁸⁹ Robert Hoftun Gjestad, quoted in Ihle 2003a:94

⁹⁰ According to Wikipedia, “**Rockism** is an [informal] ideology of popular music criticism, coined by Peter Dinklage and used extensively in the British music press from the early 1980s. The fundamental tenet of rockism is that some forms of popular music, and some musical artists, are more authentic than others. However, in recent years the term has been used increasingly in a pejorative manner. Critics have further charged that the ideology is racist, sexist and homophobic”. (Wikipedia, July 23 2008). Ihle (2003) does not invoke this term, but he appears to be describing a similar phenomenon.

White Stripes” received grand acclamation as an “unspoilt” phenomenon by Norwegian critics, among others by journalist Håkon Moslet:

“The White Stripes are an unforged phenomenon. They are an uncontrollable and uncensored alternative in a business ruled by producers, managers, and stylists” (Håkon Moslet, quoted by Ihle 2003b).

According to Ihle, Norwegian rock critics (and audiences) have a particularly strong liking for bands who do not sound “produced”. But sometimes it seems that not only does the *music business* threaten to spoil music’s authenticity, but the *musicians themselves* endanger the fragile core of music as they touch it with their mundane fingers and guitar picks. Or is it in fact the *music* of the music which threatens the “music”⁹¹? The less “played” and “shaped” the music appears to be, the more “real” it is often thought to be. The term “musikermusikk” – *musicians’ music*, which may have approximately the same derogatory denotation as “flinkismusikk”, suggests this. Recalling Øystein’s explanation of the value of skills – that some guys are interested in practicing their instrument in order to be able to make the groove work perfectly – this suggests an interesting paradox. If music works well as *music* (as in organized sound patterns rather than artistic expression, emotional message, or intellectual concept), it is assumed that instead of making something valuable, the musicians are (as the expression is in the business) taking a collective “wank”⁹². The music has come to represent the surface, the shell which surrounds the essential contents. And if there is nothing else there to be found but *musical* gestures and textures (rhythms, timbre, melody, sound) and the *body* responding to it – well, then the shell is empty.

In the Academy Award-winning picture “Amadeus”, the nobleman (and musical ignoramus) who has commissioned a work from the poor genius, sends a frustrated Mozart back home to revise his Adagio with the following absurd verdict: “Too many notes”. Perhaps rock critics, then, at times demonstrate a similar impulse. *Too much music* stands in the way of the message, and diffuses the core. At least, that would be the case if the notes are adornments.

Beautification, *pynt*, and play

It is a common notion that the most typical features of African-American vocal expression in popular music are its vocal acrobatics and virtuous melismas. The story goes that in the

⁹¹ The term ‘music’ has several different denotations. An often heard expression among musicians and audiences, is the antagonism between “just playing” and “making music”. If a singer receives the compliment that “today you really made music” – this normally, in my experience, refers to everything “between the notes”: a convincing expression, successful communication of meaning, etc.

⁹² “Wanking off” being another common analogy to playing “flinkis” music.

1960s, record company executive Berry Gordy made Motown artists simplify their melismas and skip other gospel-derived expressive effects (growling, breathing, shouting, etc.) so that a large, white audience would be able to hum along with the radio. Years have passed, and singers of soul and r&b are no longer so careful about displaying their vocal skills: Beyoncé’s mainstream audience does not seem intimidated by her ornamented accomplishments. What is more, pop vocals in general have adopted many of these features. Ballad singers like Mariah Carey and Céline Dion have, so to speak, been worth their weight in vocal jewelry⁹³ among an audience always hungry for more, faster, flashier. Of course, among audiences with a more “distinguished” taste they are the queens of the land of the “flinkis”. In *Let’s Talk About Love. A Journey to the End of Taste* (2007) Carl Wilson grapples brilliantly with questions of “good” and “bad” taste in popular music, using as case his own dislike towards one of the most grotesquely popular, yet also enthusiastically hated, artists of our time: Céline Dion. Of her ornamented style, Wilson writes that “Her singing itself is aspirational, reaching out palpably in vocal curlicues and unfurling bolts, like overstuffed furniture festooned with a fat flower pattern. Her voice itself is *nouveau riche*. It’s a volume business. No wonder middle class critics find it gauche” (Wilson 2007:69). So, are the vocal curlicues just a cheap flower print on the surface of the surface? Or is it possible to regard the conspicuous *styling* of black vocal style as more than *pynt*⁹⁴?

Shane and Graham White’s (1998) book *Stylin’: African-American Expressive Culture, from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* contextualizes African-American style in a resistance perspective. The authors tell the story of how black men and women from slavery to the 1940s claimed a right to street life, visibility and pride through expressive culture. Sometimes excessive to levels that *the middle class would find gauche*, black style has had both humorous and subversive elements of imitation, exaggeration and parody of white style⁹⁵. But there is another, central perspective to be considered when the importance of black stylistic excess is evaluated: Where a slave’s value had been measured in his ability to work, the flamboyant black dandy and the extravagantly posing pimp became virtual figures of resistance: bucking authority through style, these urban figures communicated material abundance and absence of labour through sartorial display. The style wars have, then, been a fight to reclaim human value.

⁹³ Writing this, I recall the Whitney Houston/Mariah Carey duet “When you believe” from 1998. We listened in suspense the first time they showed this long-awaited gladiator match on MTV: who would win the duel?

⁹⁴ The Norwegian word for decoration.

⁹⁵ See also the discussion of black subversive play with stereotypes in chapter 2.

One of the characters described by White and White is the ragtime pianist Willy “the Lion” Smith. In his own autobiography, Smith recalls his mother playing the familiar hymns on the piano. He’d say to her: “That sounds all right, but it can be beautified”, and made his mother furious when he changed her hymns into ragtime (Smith and Hoefer 1964:25). Although *Stylin’* does not directly consider music, the book does provide an interesting contextual and historical background for the black, vocal propensity to *beautify* melodies.

Beautification – or what we in Norwegian call *pynt* – has according to anthropologists traditionally had a dubious reputation in Norwegian cultural discourse. Sociologist Kjetil Rolness (1995), who has written extensively and entertainingly about taste regimes, describes how Norwegian experts of home decoration during the 1930s, 40s and 50s propagated a *moral* aesthetic codex. The Norwegian people were taught how to live and decorate *correctly*, while the traditional, ornamented – and far more popular – styles were deemed dangerous – and damned (59). Puritan virtues were applied to design: “Ornaments became to the utensil what idleness was to man – the root of all evil. The adornment did not make itself useful, hence it had to be removed/disposed of” (76).

But a vocalist embellishing a melody is not only *beautifying* it in the sense that he makes it prettier, and he does not only *impress* the listener by showing his technical mastery; he is also arousing the audience’s response by *surprising* them. Sometimes following the well-trodden path of idiomatic passages, and other times catching the listener off guard by throwing in an unexpected caper, he is *playing* with the melody, with his co-musicians and with those who listen. Ornamentation is, at its best, a form of playful improvisation. According to anthropologist Marianne Gullestad (Gullestad & Brox 1989:105), “Norwegian culture makes a big point of all that is practical and useful, and places less importance in aesthetics and creative playfulness”. Still, she explains, Norwegians need creative outlets, and home decoration serves that purpose: it is “creative play, camouflaged as serious and useful chores which ‘have to be done’”. “Norwegian men and women do not play openly, but under the cover of doing something practical and sensible” (ibid.).

Why should play be a shameful secret? Where does this aesthetic morality come from, and is it particularly “Norwegian”? Analysts have pointed to the legacy of the Protestant Church, and argued that its moral codex remains a pervasive force even in a largely secularized Norwegian society. A non-religious Protestantism maintains a pietist longing for genuineness, but has transferred it to social and cultural do’s and don’ts. Such a moral aesthetics has also had political bearings: Rolness (1992) describes how the leftist political elite of the baby-boomers have crusaded against aesthetic indulgences (such as color-TV

during the 1970s) with tight discipline: “While the religious puritans attempted to cleanse the church of catholic remains: ceremonies, ornaments, all pomp and circumstance, in other words the religion’s seductive elements, the modern atheists practiced their exorcism against everything artificial and synthetic (synonymous with bourgeois and capitalist)” (283; my translation). In such a cultural regime, expressive overflow signal a lack of sincerity. In a different aesthetic universe, however, ornaments and effects are a central means of showing heartfelt emotion.

Adornments, emotions and inappropriate expressivity

“...exploits without shame every dramatic trick in the book – changes of volume from a whisper to a shout, distortions of the speech rhythms of the verse, abrupt changes of register from falsetto to growl with no attempt to smooth the transition, now crooning and humming as if to herself, now belting out a phrase, and bursting out at the climax, making obvious the strain she and her voice are undergoing, dying away, apparently about to end softly but then, on the final word, spiralling upwards in pentatonic patterns and into falsetto. It is a performance of eerie imaginative power, saved from excess by absolute conviction and subtle musical intelligence (...)” (Small 1987:109-110).

After vividly describing Marion William’s gospel performance, Christopher Small concludes that her conviction is enough to find the soprano not guilty of excess⁹⁶. Another way to put it, might be that “she’s got soul”. His description, of course, encompasses much more than “plain” ornamentation – but how do we in fact draw the line between effects and expressiveness, between ornamentation and emotion?

In his before mentioned work on 1990s African-American popular ballads, Richard Rischard scrutinizes vocal ornamentation as “*primary to the expression of feeling in African-American pop*” (Rischard 2004:108, my italics). Through formal analysis of a number of representative ballads he shows how ornaments are employed to enhance expressivity and build up the narrative of a song. For example, he finds that melismatic singing is most prominent at the bridge-to-third-chorus juncture. Looking at the relationship between *song form* and the particularities of vocal ornamentation which he terms the repertory’s “vocal etiquette”, he observes that “expressiveness works in close conjunction with form. Position in the form seems to determine the appropriateness of gesture”. His use of the term *etiquette*, he explains, is a conscious effort aimed at invoking notions of “appropriate behavior”. Challenging the notion that ornamentation is used indiscriminately and excessively in

⁹⁶ One might suspect that Small projects his own Protestant morality onto her performance when he feels compelled to declare that she is not to be convicted of “excess” although she exploits these effects “without shame”.

African-American vocal style, he wants to describe the socially established norms which govern the use of ornamentation in popular ballads.

Kathrine: "I think that if a white person *adlibs* just as much... It's just so much more *allowed* if they are black, I think. It is so much easier for me to buy into it then. [The rest of the group expresses consent.] While if it's a white person then it's like "No, this is way too much". I have often thought so in connection to gospel and people who sing covers. Even when they can *adlib* really well, I just think it's too much. But if they are black, then I'm like: 'Yeah, yeah, keep going!'"

Judging from the statement above, the notion of *appropriateness* in vocal ornamentation not only relates to its ubication in song form, or the conviction with which it is performed, but also to the cultural identity of subject who is performing it. And sometimes it seems that *expressiveness* is just as inappropriate as excessive decoration. In his jazz vocal classes, Morten from my focus group started his work of deliberately eliminating the explicit signifiers of emotion from his vocal style:

Morten: "It was mostly about "peeling off" some of that typical feeling, or ways of singing which she thought of as vulgar. But I thought of them as genuine, because I grew up with it. When I sing in that way... To me it is completely natural to use certain effects; I am used to getting response when I do this and when I do that. *This* hits home, and *that* misses the mark. When I sing like *that* then *that* works; *that* is what I communicate with. When my voice falls, for instance, or when I use a breathy tone, when I use "*whoaaaa*", when I expand the strength, when I use my voice very dynamically, slide up and down, use my body, when I cry as I'm singing, those are the things I am used to, and those are the things she thought were vulgar".

Ane: "Did she use that word?"

Morten: "Yes, yes. All the time. She plainly thought of it as vulgar. And letting go of all inhibitions, I can see that people see that as vulgar, but still..."

Letting go of all inhibitions and making a show of ones inner emotional life in public may indeed be regarded as vulgar. According to common stereotypes of Norwegian culture, Norwegians are moderate at expressing emotion, and even coming on too strong when giving someone a compliment is fairly uncommon social behavior. Of course, singing is hardly "common social behavior" either – but is it unreasonable to assume that if a somewhat subdued manner is a social convention, it may also a musical one? "In social life as well as in other areas, Norwegians are sparsely equipped with expressive ruches and friendly ornaments", Tord Larsen explains. He describes Norway as an anti-ritual society which wants to get rid of *the empty gesture* (Larsen 1984:32). What is more, he argues, Norwegians disapprove of masks. Bourgeois phrases designed to smoothen the social dynamics, are quickly denounced as "fake" and hypocrite. This may also apply for the morals of vocal

style/expression: Adornments that are not perceived as “sincere” are reduced to pretentious, empty gestures:

Mari: “I remember that my teacher too, during our first year, started peeling off little things like ornaments, or attacks from below the pitch. In black music you often have things that everyone does, sort of, and maybe you’re not aware that you are doing them. So maybe that was what she meant, that *that* was the vulgar thing about it”.

Morten: “That’s a great question, because that was actually what we [my teacher and I] started discussing. We found out that sometimes there was a real meaning behind it [the ornaments and effects I employed], while other times there wasn’t”.

Gendered blackness: syrupy or tough?

“Nietzsche saw Woman as precisely “a being without visible essence, an unseeable core, concealed by a sheen of adornments”, Middleton (2006:94) recalls in his *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music*, and reminds us that “masquerade has commonly been seen as the privileged strategy of female sexuality *tout court*”. Remembering the rock journalist’s description of how Craig David “comfortably lulled [the fans] into a rosy red dreamland with his syrupy songs”, one realizes how efficiently music may be devaluated and denied credibility by association with female features. Whenever vocal style is construed as a practice of decorating and adorning, dwelling in beauty and earthly pleasures, sentimental excess and hysterical expressivity, it is arguably mapped onto a feminized, passive-circular universe. Similarly, the *absence* of ornaments is conceptualized as a way of “cutting down to the core”; and a less emotionally involved, more *disinterested* position is a pronounced strategy of avoiding “vulgarity”. This (as well as conspicuous use of technology)⁹⁷ seems to open the doors to the traditionally male regime of artistic transcendence. Once again it seems that we are back in a western dichotomized imagery where notions of race, class and gender conveniently conflate in order to form a collective low-Other which may serve as a necessary binary opposition to the white, male subject. Is the “authenticity” of blackness converted into hard currency only as it is appropriated in romantic art discourse and qualified by the white gaze?

Stan Hawkins (2002:174) notes that “in spite of the problems attached to machismo, it is interesting that black male identity can be aligned to the feminine”. He refers to Lynne Segal’s observation that ““the assertion of Black manhood is both macho and largely homophobic, and yet at the same time, as we saw with earlier assertions of Negritude, more in tune with Western notions of the “feminine” in its claims to physicality, bodily awareness,

⁹⁷ Once more, see Dickinson 2004

emotional assertiveness, and a greater sense of communality' (1977:195)" (ibid.). The relations between the feminized and the hypermasculine concepts of black manhood are complex, considering that both arguably engender objectification: bell hooks (2004:80) propounds that the process of fetishization "renders the black masculine 'menace' feminine through a process of patriarchal objectification".

The notions of black style articulated in the majority of my focus group's statements seem to point implicitly to a feminized sphere. Øystein's viewpoints on black music, on the other hand, invoked almost exclusively macho stereotypes of black manhood. These different emphases probably indicate that not only cultural context, but also personal desires are at play when the concept of "musical blackness" is constructed. Of course, musical references play into the conceptualization process, too: While my focus group mostly referred to traditional gospel music, popular ballads and soul, Øystein's musical practice was based in harder and funkier traditions.

Øystein: "Black vocal style is characterized by punch, by power. There is a surplus of energy, and it sounds as easy as a child's play, doing the adlibs and everything".

Even the practice of vocal ornamentation seems, in Øystein's statement above, to be construed as a demonstration of a masculinized, psychical superiority. During our conversation, he lamented that entering the 1980s "all the blacks started singing white ballads" and "all the toughness was lost". He found those "tacky" (klissete) ballads "a turn away from blackness and towards whiteness. Øystein emphasized firmness, authority, and a tough attitude when he explained his musical preferences. Perhaps such a construction of black style fit his personal objectives and desires better. Throughout the interview he emphasized *toughness* (pronouncing it in Norwegian: "tøffness") as the most central and desirable quality of black music; in fact, the term seemed to work as a central metaphor of musical blackness itself: Music embodying such a "tøffness" would in many cases qualify as black to him.

In-between-ness

After doing my first interviews, I began to speculate on a curious observation. Seemingly, some of the qualities that to Øystein were essential in a performance of blackness would *decrease* the potential blackness of a style in Oda's ears.

Oda: “There has been gospel, and... so-called black music – soul, r&b, and... funk. Which maybe isn’t black, when I come to think about it”.

As Oda listed the music she had been exposed to throughout her childhood, she mentioned in passing that she wasn’t sure if one would call *funk* a black genre. This comment struck me as interesting – I could hardly think of any genre signifying more explicitly on blackness, contextually and musically, than funk. But for some reason, this was not how Oda experienced it. When I contacted her a few weeks later and asked why she was reluctant to include funk in her category of black music, she thought it over for a while. While she wasn’t exactly sure why she had put it that way, and hadn’t really thought it over before, she ascribed it to the “straight-on” (“rett på”) character of funk. Although a funk beat is a structured web of rhythmical ambiguities⁹⁸, it may be the hard beat and firm authority of the style which appeared less “black” in Oda’s ears. What she personally related to black style, she said, was rather a sort of *in-between-ness*, (“det som ligger og vaker midt i mellom” – “what lies floating in between”). Øystein had also mentioned the same notion, (perhaps, though, setting it within a frame of “toughness”):

Øystein: “The rhythms are so slanting you fall off the chair”.

In soul, and particularly neosoul and r&b from the last decade, rhythmical ambiguities are often stretched to extreme degrees. Bass, drums, vocals and harmonic instruments relate to diverging layers of *time*, and the norm seems to be that the vocals should lag behind the beat set by the drums⁹⁹. Such a *time feel* may connote a cool pose, perhaps a sensually relaxed attitude, and the expression may be perceived quite differently from a hard and funky James Brown track.

“Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re *never quite on the beat*. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes you’re behind ... And you *slip into the breaks and look around*.”

Ralph Ellison’s moving description above was quoted in chapter 2 as I discussed how links are often made between the experience of social displacement and the abundance of musical ambiguities in black style. My informants also recognized double meanings as generic to the stylistic language of musical blackness. As they enter a stylistic universe they perceive as black, they arguably feel and perform this ambiguity from their own, gendered subject positions.

⁹⁸ Anne Danielsen (2006) has dedicated much of her research to the particularities of micro-rhythmical displacement in funk grooves.

⁹⁹ See for example Kristoffer Carlsen’s MA thesis “Hvor er eneren?” (2007) for an account of these genre features.

Morten: "Black vibrato is often above the pitch, don't you agree, Oda?"

Oda: "Yes, and I think that sounds so cool. You know, I actually heard that that comes from Stevie Wonder, that it is a fairly new thing. But it is something I choose to do myself; I think it sounds really nice. You actually sing quarter-tones".

Mari: "Maybe that is what I meant by "juicy"? That the sound/timbre (klang) gets juicy, it gets another energy?"

Both Mari and Øystein, in their separate settings, used the metaphor "juicy" to explain a black vocal sound. The metaphor suggests an organic quality, and implies, perhaps, a richness; a voice quality overflowing with tones. Mari invokes this image to describe how the type of vibrato discussed by Morten and Oda contains more than one pitch. In other words, this points to another sort of in-between-ness, allowing the vibrato to slide, or *slip into and out of* different pitches.

Øystein: "The blue notes, the blues scale, the juice that lies in all the phrases".

The focus group also discussed, with Oda's performance as their point of departure, how they found a black vocal style to play with timbre by constantly remodeling the vowels, or phonemes, of each word. This might perhaps be addressed as a *timbral* in-between-ness.

Morten: "In the second version, you were shaping more, you were grimacing, your face was more alive" [Laughter from the rest of the group].

Oda: "Yes, but you know what, I think those grimaces are necessary, in order to..."

Morten: "Because the biggest difference is how you shape the words"

Oda: "Yes, the vowels"

Kathrine and Mari: "Exactly!"

Morten: "You have maybe ten phonemes in a word, and then it's all about tasting each and every one of them, and sort of 'Wrrooaaeei' rub yourself from phonem to phonem, or from sound to sound. And that is very typical..."

It is generally acknowledged that constant inflection of tone color¹⁰⁰ and the treatment of language as sounds are constituent characteristics of black vocal performance. It is also common to explain these stylistic features as African retentions and by establishing homologues with the socio-historical conditions of blackness¹⁰¹. Mark Anthony Neal (1999) suggests that the "motion and musicality of the African voice" is best understood as *the*

¹⁰⁰ See Small 1987:213

¹⁰¹ As was discussed in chapter 2.

practice of polytonal expression, a term which “also provides a theoretical framework in which to examine the dominant existential challenges to black life” (38). He argues that polytonal expression not only echoes African polyrhythmic patterns and world view, but also becomes emblematic of the African-American experience (ibid.). His metaphor has clear affinities with the mentioned homologies on doubleness encircling the discourse on blackness in music. More specifically, Neal draws on Geneva Smitherman’s (1977) theory on *tonal semantics* as the “use of voice rhythm and tonal inflection to convey meaning in black communication” (134). Smitherman investigates how this gives black speech its *songified* or musical quality, and names several modes of tonal semantics in black speech, among them *intonational contouring*: the specific use of stress and pitch in pronouncing words (such as *Yeah* or *Uh-huh*) will change their meaning, albeit not on a strictly semantic level (145). Although today these meanings will be subtle and culturally determined, she explains the phenomenon as an African retention, and points to the fact that several West-African languages are “tone languages” where the actual denoted meaning of a word is decided by its pronunciation¹⁰² (135).

Smitherman also does important work in explaining the centrality of sounds at work in black speech: “The key to understanding black tonal semantics is to recognize that the sound of what is being said is just as important as “sense” (ibid.:135). This is commonly acknowledged in more recent literature on black music, and it is possible to observe through the prominence of rhyme and alliterative word play in most African-American oral forms. In his analysis of James Brown’s “Superbad”, Brackett (1995) argues that Brown’s performance “shows an extreme emphasis on the materiality of the signifier, [and] an almost complete lack of emphasis on the narrative” (122). This is, according to Middleton (1990:228) also addressed by Frith as the “emotive paralanguage of soul”, which is defined by a struggle *against* words.

¹⁰² However, Neal’s (1999:38) manner of connecting “the practice of polytonal expression” essentially to a black life experience on the basis of tonal West-African languages appears somewhat less convincing to the Norwegian reader; Norwegian being a tonal language too.

Authenticity and vocal deception

This chapter has been dedicated to exploring some of the discursive relations between cultural stereotypes and musical style. In the last part of the chapter I will turn my focus more directly toward questions of the voice and appropriation. The voice – situated inside the body and perceived as intimately connected to personal identity – becomes a powerful prism for bringing out the problems of authenticity, credibility, and legitimacy that are inevitable in any discussion of “white appropriation”.

Black timbre

The “constant inflection of tone color” discussed by the focus group as a feature of “black” vocal style, is a way of shaping timbre through manipulation of vowels. This mode of timbre, so to speak, is related to the pronunciation of language and to stylistic codes which have been developed over time. Vocal timbre, tone color, is a result of how the frequencies produced by the vocal folds are shaped in the various resonant spaces (in vocal tract, oral cavity, sinus, head, and body) through which they pass. The shaping of vowels is an effective way of processing timbre: An “a” and an “o” have different specters of overtones and resonate in different areas of the oral cavity. The positioning of the larynx, and the size and shape of the vocal folds themselves, as well as the regulation of them (how they are stretched; which *part* of the vocal folds are employed, etc) also regulate the timbre of a voice, as does the airflow regulated by lungs and diaphragm. Not only are these components involved in shaping different vowels, but they create the tone “behind the vowels” such as the overall style of the vocal production (an operatic pronunciation of the vowel “o” is related to, but still very different from the same vowel as pronounced in a lullaby). And also the imprint of sound which we recognize as a *person’s voice* is a result of timbre production in body, vocal folds and resonant spaces.

In my focus group’s conversation, issues of “black” timbre raised many questions and great interest, and turned out to be complicated to deal with. Much of the discussion surrounded questions of biology, authenticity and naturalness.

Kathrine: “But their [Take 6] way of singing is... I mean you hear very clearly that they are black”.

Oda: “Yes, you do. (...) They have a way of singing, where everything is stretched and flexible all the time. Eiii, uuuooo... [she experiments vocally with the description to demonstrate her point]. And I wonder if that is something that they are not aware about. (...) But then it isn’t about being

black or white, then it is just about sound ideals and artistic effects that we have decided to ascribe to the “black” expression. And in that case it is learned. But I actually think that there is some DNA in the picture as well”.

Kathrine: “But where is the limit, in r&b and that sort of music? Take for instance Christina Aguilera, she sings in a black way. I mean, she has a very... You see her, and think “Is that really her voice?”

Morten: “OK, that is where this discussion started. The thing about the dark timbre. But I don’t think she has that dark sound, she didn’t sound like what you just demonstrated”.

Kathrine: “But neither does Whitney Houston”.

Morten: “No, but Joss Stone does. And that hollow sound, the typical one which seems to be biological, because... I don’t know, but it sounds like most black people, when they speak, they have some of that hollow sound. (...) But Oda sounds differently when she speaks now, than when she sang on the black example. So in other words, whites can sing with a black hollow sound. And blacks can sing white. But the question is: is it natural?”

The focus group used both words and vocal sounds as they eagerly negotiated timbral features they perceived as signifiers of blackness. They seemed to identify more or less similar traits as typically “black”. Another central question was whether Norwegian singers were able to produce these timbral qualities.

Oda: “I think that Beate Slettevold Lech sings black. In ”Folk&Røvere” she was actually singing black in her own dialect[of Norwegian]! Then I was like: “This is pretty unique”. It’s about the way that she *ad-libs*, and where she has placed her voice – it is placed far at the back, and it’s dark and hoarse and so on. Which is a sound you hear from a lot of black singers. (...) But there is another sound too, one which I have never heard a white singer produce. It’s that nasal and sharp, but...*massive* sound”.

Mari: “Why don’t you show us!”

Oda: “But I don’t stand a chance! I can’t do it. It’s like they just take their speaking voice upwards, like a big pipe that... *bwaaaaa*”.

Outside of the focus group, Øystein was not in doubt as to whether a “black” vocal timbre could be produced by non-black singers:

Øystein: “You won’t get a white gospel choir to sound black, and that’s that. It’s like taking a brass horn and comparing it to one made of light metal.

The edge of essentialism never seemed far away when questions of black timbre were discussed. A black voice produced by a black body easily comes to represent “blackness” converted into sound.

Vocal identity and pretension

The voice represents not only the body, but personal identity. The idea of the Self, Even Ruud (1997:50) explains, can be traced back to the notion of “a person” as this is derived from the latin word “*persona*”, which translates as *masque*. Ruud explains how Western culture has maintained a notion of how the voice (behind the masque, so to speak) carries some of the distinctive features ascribed to our concept of individuality.

However, in an anti-essentialist view, identities are not static but performed and shaped. They are the results of the impulses, desires and choices with which we navigate through social structures. The same might be said of the voice. Frith (1996) discusses how the voice is easier to change as a matter of personal identity than one’s face, and that it is not just a matter of acting. The voice, he says, is “certainly a key to the ways in which we change identities, pretend to be something we’re not, deceive people, lie”(197). And though we may be pretending and deceiving, this is rarely a fully conscious act. Who is to decide which voice is “real” and which one is “fake” when all our voices are equally performed? The voice “can also be used to deceive ourselves”, Frith explains: ““Putting on voices” is not something we only do as part of a specific public performance (...) it is, rather, a normal part of our imaginative activity (198). Frith quotes Jonathan Rée saying that it may in fact be difficult to know “one’s own voice” amidst the babble of the different voices in which we talk to ourselves”, and asks: “do you really possess an ownmost, innermost voice (...)?” (ibid.).

“One of pop’s pleasures has always been singers taking on other people’s voices (...) This is most obvious in the white use of black voices in rock and roll history (...) No listener could have thought that either [Jerry Lee] Lewis or [Mick] Jagger was black; every listener realized that they wanted to be” (ibid.:198).

Øystein suggested in our conversation that a Norwegian cultural climate makes it difficult to acknowledge the performative nature of vocal identity:

Øystein. “Singing is about pretending (gjøre seg til), and that is the reason why the Norwegian vocal culture is so poor. It’s all about acting. About putting on a convincing act, sort of. If you are going to practice singing black music, then necessarily you have to pretend and imitate your influences”.

To Øystein’s experience, he said, singers who “nailed it” (who performed convincingly in a “black” idiomatic style) were also particularly good at pronouncing foreign languages. This, he thought, required the same bold attitude to imitating and performing. But while he saw this

as a common thing in the United States, he meant that few Norwegians had the courage to openly experiment with their vocal identity.

Øystein: "The idea of "pretending" is frowned upon in Norway. Because then it's not "true", you know. If you try to sing a blue note, then you are definitely faking it."

Kjetil Rolness' (1995) studies of the aesthetic moralism imposed on Norwegian home interiors support this observation. As was discussed above, social gestures such as "empty phrases" have often been regarded as pretentious and dishonest, rather than polite, in a Norwegian cultural context. Another form of dishonest masquerade is connected to *imitation*. Rolness describes how the orthodox arts and crafts-movement virtually banned imitations in the home interiors. Imitating was just as reprehensible as lying and cheating – obviously manners which not only people, but also *objects*, should abstain from (91). Even decorations were subjected to a Protestant morality. Rolness find this convincingly exemplified at the Horten Housewife's Society's domestic exhibition in 1953. At the exhibition, it was declared that "a wallpaper imitating stucco is an abomination":

"A wallpaper is only a beautiful and useful wall covering as long as it does not pretend to be anything else than what it is: paper with a patterned color print" (Rolness 1995: 90).

A wallpaper should not pretend to be a solid wall. Familiar socio-cultural dynamics may be recognized in this (normally unwritten) law: The cheap and synthetic is acceptable as long as it stays within the lower cultural field where it belongs. But the moment it attempts to assume an authentic status and lie about its low-class heritage in order to enter a higher stratum, it becomes repulsive. In the field of art music, it similarly seems safer to leave certain pop-features in their hit lists. Consciously trained jazz singers make sure to communicate a distance to light commercial genres by staying out of the cookie jar, leaving the tempting adornments to those who prefer easily digested music.

More than anything, however, the statement above warns against imitating a material. This would be to commit the ultimate dishonesty: material imitation is much worse than imitating a style, because it is a *forgery of essence*. Another one of Rolness' examples from the moral universe of 20th century home interiors illustrates this point well (and the statement strikes an open chord in my own field of enquiry):

"A pine table is a decent thing, but a pine table pretending to be made of black walnut, is a monstrosity" (ibid.: 73, quoting Michl 1992).

Once again, the distance to certain vocal ideologies is short. *Pine* relates to *black walnut* like Øystein's invocation of *light metal* relates to *brass* – they are powerful metaphors of essential qualities. Is it possible that the riskiest way for singers to “pretend to be something we're not, deceive people, lie” is connected to voice quality, or timbre? The wood may represent the essence of a table, and a person's distinguishable voice often comes to represent the essence of an individual human being.

Oda: “Everyone is mimicking, I think it is a general thing. At least I do; I have mimicked every artist I have heard. And then I have learned a lot from it: maybe a sound or a groove sounded really easy, but was hard to do after all. But later I quit this habit, because I got the response that it was artificial. And I think that is a sort of prejudice, it's like “We see you, and we are listening to you, and it is impossible that it's natural for you to sound like that”.

Sometimes, then, we let the singer's *body* testify to the (lack of) authenticity of her timbre. Curiously, an observation from Mari suggests that at other times, the *performance of body* may attribute authenticity to timbre:

Mari: “I think that you seek a bigger body, and authority, in the second [black] version than in the first. And that, I feel, is sort of the African-American woman versus the white woman.”

Oda asked if the focus group had experienced one of her two performances as more artificial than the other (with the obvious objection that both performances were in fact constructed as examples of “black” and “white” style):

Mari: “No, yes, I guess I thought that the first [“white”] version was a bit more artificial than the second one”.

Oda: “Oh, that is kind of funny... But I have been told the opposite for years, which is why I stopped doing the black things. But that was actually where I came from. I mean, that is what I have been listening to!”

Overdoing it: style, *musical habitus*, and authenticity

Several of the people I talked to commented that white people who want to sound “black” have a tendency to “overdo it” (and thereby fail to succeed).

Morten: “Anyway, if you listen to a recording, they have this hoarse sound. For some reason. And white gospel choirs, they tend to exaggerate that a lot. So we used to do a lot of that, lots of air, and chest voice, and every possible thing”.

Ane: “More than... black singers?”

Morten: “Yes, very often. That's just the way it works, you exaggerate what you hear in order to...”

The tendency to parody and exaggerate runs deep in African-American expressive cultures. Considering this tendency is seen as a key element to understanding black style. Perhaps one might suggest that minstrellesque mimicry, oversized bling, and breathtaking vocal cascades are related in this sense? Influential singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith started their careers in the minstrel show, and black vocals, as my informants also discussed, are often *a lot*: a lot of voice, a lot of drama, a lot of contrasts. However, the newcomer's tendency to *overdo it* is a different matter. The outsider often gives himself away by exaggerating the stylistic traits of an unfamiliar aesthetics. Without yet having a sophisticated ear for details (and lacking the cultural background to interpret them), little things become too big.¹⁰³ A native English speaker easily recognizes a foreign accent – and not only the unconcealed and proud accent such as the singing Italian tone, or the demonstratively pointed lips of a French vowel. The skilful, but overly *shaped* accent of the eager, but self-conscious visitor is even more conspicuous. It may be this tendency Greg Tate is referring to when he speaks of “the simplicity of white mimesis and the complexity of black expression” (2003:5).

Oda: “It’s like all those people who think that just because they are going to sing gospel and soul and r&b, they think that “if I just adlib as much as possible [I’ll get it right]”. But then it turns out they aren’t any good at it, and then they do a lot of poor work on their timbre and pronunciation and adlibbing and so forth, but they just give it all they’ve got, because they think that is what it takes. And then, maybe some other soloist comes in right after that. And does it all naturally, and maybe doesn’t adlib at all. And it turns out that *that* was the blackest performance. Or the performance which stylistically was most correct”.

In the early nineties the feature movie success “The Commitments” fed a whole wave of mainstream interest in soul oldies. The movie spelled out the irony and complexity surrounding notions of race and authenticity in soul music, notably in the famous scene where the band members in their singing Dublin accent proclaimed to be “black and proud”. Yet, the story leaned heavily on common myths: the band’s performance was portrayed as “authentic soul” by emphasizing the musicians’ frustration over Irish social marginalization in Britain, by using an urban working class *mise-en-scene*, and by describing the strong sexual dynamics within the group. Of course, sexual entanglements finally blew the band to pieces.

In the real world, however, what would it take for a group of Irish youngsters to convince that they have soul? Although the media tends to invoke Amy Winehouse’s rough lifestyle when they ascribe her authenticity, is that sufficient to declare her appropriation of black signifiers as credible?

¹⁰³ Like the notorious *w* which pops up at every possible (and impossible) occasion when Norwegians speak English (How are you? Wery well, thank you).

Mari: “When people stand there and adlib and give it all they’ve got, and they don’t really master it, you see very clearly what they are trying to do and it’s a lot more obvious that they are imitating. But when they master it you don’t even come around to thinking it”.

...

Oda: “I stop believing in it when the person in question doesn’t have the technical surplus required. It’s as simple as that”.

Like Mari and Oda express here, the ability to perform convincingly in a stylistic, musical and technical sense is probably just as important as social factors when it comes to proving that you actually *belong* in a musical style. Of course, demonstrating a certain aesthetic sensibility, as I laid it out in chapter 3, also includes *non-musical* elements like physical gestures and language. Although everyone is not as attentive towards musical detail as my vocal student informants, I believe that those who are well-acquainted with an aesthetic universe will react to small signifiers such as timbre, phrasing and time feel, and know “intuitively” if they find someone to be “a fake”. (Of course, the question of whether someone “pulls it off” or not, is often open to discussion, and that is what feeds most discourse around white appropriation of black music – as exemplified by the conversations and blogs I reported from in the first chapter). Another way of addressing the notion of *stylistic sensibility* might be to call it a *musical habitus*, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s use of the term¹⁰⁴.

To Bourdieu, the *habitus* is a system of aesthetic dispositions which results from early socialization and natural exposure to a certain cultural capital. It is deeply embedded in the body, and renders possible a naturalized and effortless relationship to the cultural expressions and values one has been exposed to. The *habitus* is hard to change deliberately through studies or other systematic accumulation of cultural capital: a person’s embodied dispositions will quickly be identified by legitimate members of a cultural stratum, and reveal her attempt to “be something she is not”. Thus Bourdieu shows that dynamics of taste complicate social mobility and are part of the strategies which privileged groups use to exclude lower strata from their playground. But he also argues that these strategies are largely unconscious. Most members of any social field will experience their preferences as natural and self-evident, and

¹⁰⁴ In *La Distinction* [1979](1984) Bourdieu shows how taste and aesthetic preferences are attached to class, and more specifically to economical and cultural capital. The cultural capital is a measure of the access to, and ability to adequately employ, cultural expressions which in society are deemed to have a high value. Cultural capital, i.e. legitimate access to *high culture*, is normally accumulated in a family in the course of generations, and it is manifest in a person’s *habitus*.

hardly reflect on *why* another individual doesn't seem to *fit into* a context: "[t]rue culture is nature" (Bourdieu 1984:68).

Although the concept of a *musical habitus* seems to offer an interesting analytical tool for my own discussion, I will not dive much deeper into Bourdieu's descriptions of the politics of taste and power relations¹⁰⁵. A common objection to applying his analysis today is that the cultural hierarchies are multiple and the relationship between the cultural fields is now more complex than it was in France during the 1960s¹⁰⁶. Cultural capital which represents a high currency in one subculture or stylistic universe is worth little in another. And it is important to note that today's cultural consumers are often cultural omnivores, who may *themselves* devalue the change they have in their pockets when they enter a new field. Still, I find that Bourdieu's concept of social and cultural fields can shed light on the dynamics that work to exclude certain individuals and groups from participation within the "legitimate" circle of an aesthetic expression, and including others. There are obviously meeting points between Bourdieu's notion of partly overlapping social fields which have their own politics of domination and social agency, and the notion of aesthetic universes which are governed by established aesthetic criteria.

Mari: "[Y]ou shouldn't mix the different aesthetics, in a way. That is, if you sing jazz then you shouldn't try to use ornaments, for example. It's a sort of purism; you know a lot of people think that way. That you should cultivate things separately (rendyrke ting). There are lots of rules".

Being familiar with the current "rules" of a genre, and applying them adequately, may be felt as an aesthetic necessity, like Mari describes here. When Christopher Small (1987) claims that "the blues singer is usually *far less restricted* in terms of pitch inflection than a classical singer, *feeling free* to approach a tone from above or below, to tail off in pitch towards the end of a note, to *use any number of different kinds of vibrato* as well as falsetto, grunts, yodels, yells, complex colourings of tone, and abrupt shifts of register, which are featured prominently instead of being smoothed over as by a classical singer" (204; italics added), he underappreciates these dynamics. Although he also acknowledges that blues is a "style"

¹⁰⁵ For an interesting account of how vocal style regimes articulate social power, visit John Potter's concept of "vocal authority" in which he employs a Gramscian model to describe how *vocal techniques* become hegemonic. Although he mainly deals with the politics of a classical style, he also observes that "the loosening hold that rock music has on its old hegemonic status in popular music, is contributing to the stylistic pluralism of the present" (Potter 1998:199).

¹⁰⁶ Middleton (1990:248) argues that "Clearly such distinctions work (today as then) in a much more complex way than any simple high/popular (dominant/subordinate) dichotomy of musical languages and aesthetics can encompass; and they cannot be mapped easily on to any rigid ideological schema. They divide genres and styles – but also cross and interrelate them – and at times produce socially and aesthetically layered variants of a single genre (such as the waltz) or sometimes bursting them open on the lines of their contradictions (as with punk)."

which “consists of a disciplined performance” (ibid.:198), the statement above fails to acknowledge the existence of aesthetic rules which regulate the blues singer’s practice (a blues singer using an *operatic* vibrato would no longer be perceived a blues singer). Small describes the multitude of vocal effects and techniques as *freedom*, instead of observing that they are in fact the codes themselves.

As manifestations of a certain *feeling*, then, one might say that vocal markers of style express a certain *musical habitus*. Drawing on my informants’ subjective contributions, markers like adornments, emotional expressivity, *toughness*, rhythmical, timbral or pitch-related *in-between-ness*, or specific features of timbre may express a “black” vocal *habitus*. Resulting from a long process of socialization, they may indeed become embodied dispositions – a kind of cultural body language. This may be the reason why we sometimes get the impression of inauthenticity and embarrassing “fake” when we hear vocalists with a different stylistic background employ these traits.

Morten: “So maybe what she [the teacher] is actually saying, is: “You don’t belong to this tradition. Sing with the voice you have been given. You are white, you are Norwegian”. Maybe she is just saying “you just don’t manage this very well”. I don’t know, that might be what she means. Maybe I am just not able to do it right”.

However, when employed effortlessly and convincingly, subtle stylistic details may express a naturalness which grants legitimate access to what is perceived as an *authentic* performance of style – even if this style is generally connected to racial, ethnic, or cultural qualities. I would like to suggest that what often determines the legitimacy of participation in an aesthetic field, and accordingly the ineffable “authentic” quality of the performance, is such an internalized stylistic sensibility or *musical habitus*. In other words, the subtle markers of stylistic sensibility that singers employ are closely related to the perceived notions of authenticity in music.

Discoursing into a territory of styles and stereotypes, I have in this chapter allowed voices from my interviews and other sources to lead the way in the thematic landscape, and to authenticate my own argument. In the following, and final, chapter, I will allow my own voice to come forth as I enter in an interpreting conversation with two musical discourses; two wayfaring voices.

6. Wayfaring voices: An interpretive conversation

Our voices bear in them traces of the places we have been, the people we have met, the songs and sounds we have heard. Whatever notions may exist of a “black” voice, or of a “Norwegian” vocal style, testify to this idea. The problems that arise when we consider the possibility of “black vocal style” produced in a “Norwegian context” are perhaps best met by acknowledging that the Norwegian cultural horizon is steadily expanding, allowing for influences from across the oceans to drift in on our shores.

In this final chapter I will analyze two musical examples; two voices that carry traces from musical travels, or if you will; an extended Norwegian context: Kristin Asbjørnsen’s “Wayfaring Stranger”¹⁰⁷ and Torun Eriksen’s “Glittercard”¹⁰⁸. Both of these performances may, in my opinion, be said to signify on notions of “blackness” and “Norwegianness” as these were conceptualized in the previous chapters. This seems, however, to occur in very different ways. I will therefore approach the two singers differently, and consider not only vocal style, but also visual representation and public reception¹⁰⁹ where this seems relevant. I will also draw on Roland Barthes influential essay on “the grain of the voice”. Well aware that this essay has been quoted extensively for many years, I still find Barthes’ ideas to open up intriguing questions related to both these singers’ voices. As I deal with vocal features such as timbre and ornamentation as well as considering other musical parameters, I will place these texts in dialogue with some of the observations from the previous chapter, for example by allowing my focus group’s notions of “white” and “black” vocal style to influence my perspective. However, my conversation with these two musical discourses will depend largely on my own subjective, interpretive moves. Needless to say, my interpretations do not profess any knowledge of the singers’ own intentions, which should be regarded as unknown and irrelevant to my purposes. In other words, I do not assume that these singers *intend* to “signify on blackness” in any way.

¹⁰⁷ I will examine a televised live performance of this song.

¹⁰⁸ The studio recording from her debut album.

¹⁰⁹ Numerous newspaper clippings, reviews and interviews from Norwegian media will be quoted; all are translated by me. All details are listed under references.

Kristin Asbjørnsen's Wayfaring Stranger

The most common response

During the two or three years I have been working on this project, I have talked briefly with a lot of people about my work. Student colleagues, musician colleagues, friends, academic staff, family, strangers and acquaintances have asked politely about the topic of my Master's thesis. This conversation has assumed a very standardized form: I have normally answered that my thesis attempts to explore how notions of "vocal blackness" come to signify in a Norwegian context. After observing the confused expression of my acquaintance's face, I have often simplified and explained that one of the things I am looking into is Norwegian singers who are thought to sing in a "black style", or who in some way orient themselves towards an African-American vocal aesthetics. At this point, most people ask me with some interest who this might be. Since I have not been able to provide a good answer, I have usually taken advantage of the situation by sending the question right back at them. At this point, an astonishing share have answered that they presume I am writing about Kristin Asbjørnsen.

After getting this response a great number of times, I became curious. Personally I had never thought of Asbjørnsen as a singer with a "black" sound or style. What might be the reason why so many, once the question was brought to their attention, seemed to associate Asbjørnsen with notions of blackness? I found that in order to discuss this, I had to look at not only Asbjørnsen's vocal performance, but also the way she stages her vocal practice, and not least how the media discourse staged her as an artist around the release of her album "Wayfaring Stranger".

On second thought, it was in fact quite explicable that many came to think of this particular singer, who is also known from the bands Krøyt and Dadafon, when I launched the idea of "black vocal style in a Norwegian context": Kristin Asbjørnsen was at the time experiencing massive media attention related to the release of her first solo album, *Wayfaring Stranger – A Spiritual Songbook*, where she interpreted a selection of spirituals. The album is probably the biggest selling and recording of a traditional African-American repertoire which has ever been made in Norway, and also subject to the most media coverage: 35 000¹¹⁰ sold copies and extensive touring both in Norway and abroad meant that Asbjørnsen reached a large audience with her spiritual songbook. The album was nominated to the Norwegian

¹¹⁰ According to the newspaper *Adresseavisen* 29 January, 2008

“Grammy” *Spellemannsprisen* in 2006, and critics and audiences alike celebrated the album as one of those rare, outstanding achievements.

In addition to praising Kristin Asbjørnsen’s voice, critics tended to emphasize spirituality and the African-American legacy communicated by the album in their interviews, concert reports and album reviews. Regarding these facts, it is hardly surprising that so many of the people I talked to mentioned her name with reference to my project.

”You can hear the chains rip when Kristin gets going with old slave soul”
(Per A. Riisnes Jr., *Dagens næringsliv* 23 September, 2006).

“As the concert begins, you forget that you are sitting on the hardest church benches in Northern Europe; now you are in the American South (...) [After the concert] you are left with an exotic feeling, yet unusually close to home, with music which is unknown to us icicles of the north, but with a melancholy which goes straight to the heart” (Sjule, *Rana blad*, 6 August, 2006).

Liberatingly colorblind

“A collection of African folk songs interpreted by a Norwegian jazz vocalist seems at first like something which might taste a little too much of white “world music” imperialism” (Per A. Riisnes Jr, *Dagens Næringsliv*, 23 September, 2006).

“It is easy to start with a somewhat cynical attitude (utgangspunkt) towards a project like this, where “well fed” musicians from the safe Norway are interpreting spirituals – songs which represent a big historical, political and spiritual power (sprengkraft) to a people from a notably different situation and time” (Enlid, *Adresseavisa*, 26 September, 2006).

Some critics expressed their initial suspicion that Asbjørnsen’s album might inappropriately exploit a Black American legacy of suffering and hope. Regarding the critical discourse on white appropriation which I discussed in chapter 2, it could easily be problematic to deal with a record where musicians with university degrees from one of the world’s richest and most secularized country made great success with lyrics like these:

”I wish I was in heaven sittin’ down. Oh Mary, oh Martha, I wouldn’t get tired no more”

“Lord I’m bearing heavy burdens tryin’ to get home”.

However, the public opinion seems to have concluded that Asbjørnsen is not to be accused of any such crime – indeed, she manages to navigate in this cultural minefield without stepping out of line, and this is thought to add to her artistic achievement. What is it that redeems Asbjørnsen’s work from the sphere of illegitimate appropriation?

First of all: musically she has received credit for standing firmly on her own two feet, delivering *original* and *new* interpretations of the material she is using, for bringing the material a step ahead and “making it her own” rather than trying to appropriate a genre with all its specific historical and social conditions:

“The interpretations were so clearly Asbjørnsen’s own. This is not a matter of imitation. Kristin Asbjørnsen has definitely her own qualities, and a great variety in her forms of expression (Furuhatt, *Hemnesværingen* 12 August 2006)”.

The stripped down and tasteful¹¹¹ arrangements and instrumental contributions have been regarded as important factors in the musical and expressive quality of the *Wayfaring Stranger*:

“The concert was an immensely strong experience. The reinterpretations of the traditional songs went straight to the heart. Asbjørnsen’s strong and versatile vocals, the minimalist arrangements of the songs, and the backup vocals by the three musicians filled the church and the people who were sitting there” (Nørstebø, *Utelivsguiden*, 6 June, 2006).

The album was produced in a way that similarly promoted a “naked”, close and intimate sound, and this was emphasized in interviews and press release material. As Asbjørnsen said in an interview with *Aftenposten*:

“This record is very stripped down (naken) compared to previous work I have done. We recorded the whole record live at a farm I Denmark. No reverb has been added subsequently, and that is an unusual thing for me. Which is why I was very much up to doing it this way” (Hjort, *Oslopuls.no* 25 September, 2006).

As to the message conveyed by the spirituals, Asbjørnsen is generally credited for opening up a valuable repertoire to a new audience by emphasizing universal human themes like personal journeys, hope, suffering, and change. She maintains a closeness to the texts while avoiding sentimental gorging, and can hardly be accused of depoliticizing them or robbing them of their weight. On the contrary, she involves a large audience in important stories, bringing them closer to our own lives. As expressed by the critic of *Aftenposten*:

“It is like being embraced; you feel the course of history and are included in a safe community” (Andersen, *Aftenposten* 25 September, 2006).

Asbjørnsen herself refers to this music as “inviting journey songs” (inkluderende vandringsanger)¹¹². The album title may perhaps in itself be interpreted as respectfully accentuating her own status as outsider in the encounter with these songs: *Wayfaring Stranger*.

¹¹¹ The term ‘tasteful’ is indeed often used almost interchangeably with adjectives like “stripped down”, “subdued”, or “minimalist” (at least in a Norwegian cultural context).

¹¹² See for example the lengthy interview published at www.ballade.no (Johansen 2006)

The background narrative

This album, then, can be said to pay tribute to an African-American hymn tradition while respectfully recontextualizing it. This may in itself be called a way of “signifying on blackness” in a Norwegian context. I will also propose that the *background story* of the album constitutes a narrative which contributed to increasing the general credibility of the project, as well as linking it to notions of black authenticity.

The account of how the *Wayfaring Stranger* came into being was told repeatedly in the press during the release period: In 1990 Asbjørnsen contacted the aging African-American singer Ruth Reese in Oslo and became her dedicated student in the last year of Reese’s life. Reese, who had had a long career in Europe performing both a classical repertoire and in cabaret scenes, came to Norway in the 1950s and was the first African-American artist to establish herself in an almost exclusively white Norwegian society. She took on the responsibility of spreading knowledge about African-American culture and politics, as well as campaigning against regimes such as the Apartheid system in South Africa. Reese toured the country both as a singer (with a program called “The American Negroes’ musical history through 360 years”) and as a public speaker¹¹³.

After Ruth Reese passed away in 1990 (on stage as she was receiving an award for her work against racism), her widower contacted Kristin Asbjørnsen and gave her two bags filled with music scores which Reese had left behind. Among the scores were one hundred spirituals. Asbjørnsen explained in an interview: “I was probably one of the students who had been most involved in these songs. Therefore it was a strong experience to inherit them, but also a bit intimidating ” (Hjort 2006). Asbjørnsen continued working her way into the material she had inherited, improvising and striving to find her own interpretations. This work, it seems, had a definitive impact on her life choices, as it led her to choose a jazz education and a musical career (see Johansen 2006). For years she dedicated her time to other band projects, but the spirituals were always present as an important musical and personal basis. Finally she decided to return to the material and realize this project, as she expresses:

“Making this record is like that one huge email in you inbox which blocks all the other emails and which you have to get through the system in order to move on” (Asbjørnsen quoted by Johansen 2006).

In the media and the public consciousness, this context seemed to become more important than the background stories of most albums. It arguably constituted a powerful narrative mapping out questions of authenticity and direct delivery. If one should go to the step of

¹¹³ This summary is based on a presentation made by Ellen Røsjø at Oslo Byarkiv (Røsjø 2007)

superficially deconstructing this story as a *media narrative*, one might say that the bags of scores represent a treasure chest filled with invaluable historical documents. The scores were not only the musical legacy of Ruth Reese; an African-American singer with a strong historical consciousness who fought fiercely against racism, Ruth Reese arguably became a representative of *her people*, carrying “four hundred years of resentment”¹¹⁴ and embodying the history of black suffering, hope and pride in a Norwegian context. As Asbjørnsen embraced the opportunity she had been trusted with and passed on this legacy, she became, to some degree, an intermediary of black authenticity itself. However, rather than exploiting the black musical signifiers, she sheltered the *essence* of these songs while transforming them into a musical expression and sound which she identified with¹¹⁵.

Reading a performance

Shifting the focus from the context to the text, I would like to briefly examine a performance by Kristin Asbjørnsen and her band. I find that the *visual* staging of her performance contributes considerably to the effect of the musical delivery, and so it is necessary to take this aspect into account. Asbjørnsen has an intriguing and recognizable stage persona, which could be observed as she performed the spiritual “Trying to get home” under the Norwegian Grammy Award show 2006 (Spellemannsprisen) in 2007:

Asbjørnsen is standing on center stage, her band (percussion, guitars and backing vocals) seated around her. Like she often does, Asbjørnsen is performing barefoot. She is wearing a earthy coloured, simple but designed dress in cotton-like material, and the light design is shifting in shades of orange and bright emerald green as if to underscore an atmosphere of natural, earthly magic. As the percussion begins, bare hands playing rhythmically on drums and the wooden guitar neck, she moves her body to the simple and grounded rhythm pattern, her steps weighted downwards to the ground and shifting from side to side. Rupturing this pace, her arms sometimes follow the voice in its unsteady outbursts, the palms facing upwards and reaching out from the body. The expression on her face remains deeply focused and serious as she sings, and her eyes seem to stare determined into something which we cannot see but which she delivers to us through her vocal storytelling:

“Lord, I’m climbing higher mountains trying to get home...”

¹¹⁴ In her poem “To stop a story”, Reese wrote that she was carrying “four hundred years of resentment” (Røsjø 2007).

¹¹⁵ This, of course, would be a creative and subjective interpretation of a media narrative and its reception.

The arrangement of “Trying to get home” is built up effectively by laying simple elements on top of one another. Starting with nothing but percussion and Asbjørnsen’s voice, a bass ostinate (played on the acoustic guitar) enters the groove and establishes a static, harmonic underlay which persists throughout the song. Then one and one guitar ostinate is added and looped, gradually increasing the density of the musical web. From the second verse on, the three male musicians chant with Asbjørnsen every time she repeats “*climbing mountains*” at the peak of the phrase. A floating, instrumental section takes over after the third verse, allowing a lyrical steel guitar to explore the harmonic possibilities among the other guitar patterns. Asbjørnsen improvises subduedly on top, murmuring a sentence with a light and flute-like voice. Her voice then gradually grows into a more strained expression and demands our attention, finally beginning the fourth verse which culminates in an elongated shout in the second octave. The intensity remains high during the last verses as Asbjørnsen and the band improvise among the phrases, until the groove is taken down at last and rounded off in a bluesy, a cappella major chord (at last, perhaps, getting *home*).

Since Asbjørnsen was suggested as a Norwegian vocalist with a somewhat “black” orientation, it seems natural to ask: does her vocal style correspond with my focus group’s outline of a typical “black” vocal style? I would say that quite on the contrary, her stylistic features seem to be captured much better by what they described as a “white, Norwegian jazz-orientation”. However, in addition to rock and folk music, Asbjørnsen names West-African griots among her influences. Her style is hardly derived from an African-American sphere of popular music, which seemed to dominate the stylistic concept of musical blackness formulated by my focus group, but she may have received impulses from African musical traditions. More than anything, though, Asbjørnsen seems to emphasize finding her *own*, original style. With respect to the spirituals material, she has said that

“It has been a great resource for me to encounter this material as scores, I don’t think I would have been able to find my own versions if I were just listening to old recordings. I have needed to meet it on a free basis”
(Asbjørnsen quoted by Johansen 2006).

And she is, indeed, commonly recognized not only for interpreting the spirituals in her own way, but generally for standing out as an original vocalist with her own, recognizable sound. On her own website, her “trademark sound” is described as “rich with contrasts and dynamics, with strong melancholy and a feisty devilish energy. Kristin is a master of smooth and personal distortion as well as bright and complicated singing techniques, and West-

African griot-singers are among her many sources of inspiration”.¹¹⁶ While I find this to be a good description of Asbjørnsen’s vocal style, I will attempt to explore her vocal style and timbre more closely, and I will do this partly by means of Roland Barthes’ [1977](1999) essay on “The grain of the voice”.

Timbre and grain

My focus group approached timbre as a central signifier of what they conceived as the sound of a black voice. They described such a typically “black” timbre with adjectives like *dark, hoarse, placed far at the back, that hollow sound, nasal and sharp but still massive*. Moreover, they discussed whether such a timbre, which they also found some white vocalists to approach, might be “biological” or just a “sound ideal” (an idiomatic timbre). Kristin Asbjørnsen, however, does not appear to strive for the timbre ideal they described.

Asbjørnsen’s general timbre is quite light and transparent, and maintains an immediate and unprocessed expression by remaining close to a natural speaking voice. Her voice mostly emerges from a focused center, as she employs the rim of her vocal cords rather than using the “whole organ” to create a fuller and more massive tone. This provides her vocal expression with a free and limitless quality, because the listener can sense that her voice is light and flexible enough to go just about anywhere. Still, a small grating sound at the edge of her voice maintains a grounded feeling, and stretching the voice dynamically in the higher ranges this technique also enables her to create a powerful and hard tone quality. In some instances she puts an extra rim of air to her voice, which adds an energetic character – like an eager whisper. However, I find the most conspicuous feature of Kristin Asbjørnsen’s voice to be her distortion techniques. As she sings on the “rim” of her voice, exactly next to the place where it breaks, she is able to sing on a cracking voice, distorting it and sometimes splitting the voice in rasping octaves. When she does this, she displays a lot of vocal power. Although this is a feature much used by rock vocalists, I find Asbjørnsen to stand out from typical rock aesthetics by combining the distortion with lyrical transparency and ostensible lack of control.

One of the most compelling theoretical approaches to the voice, which also deals briefly with timbre in particular, has been laid out by Roland Barthes in his essay on “the grain of the voice” [1977](1990). In this essay he addresses the difference between significance and *signifiante* in music, soliciting an “aesthetics” of musical pleasure (300). He proposes that *signifiante* may take shape in the exact space of the encounter between a language and a

¹¹⁶ www.kristinsong.com (accessed 10 October, 2008)

voice, and calls this space the *grain of the voice*. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's distinction between the *pheno-text* and the *geno-text*, Barthes describes how these two potential levels of musical meaning are embodied in vocal performance. The *pheno-song* "covers... the rules of the genre, the coded form of the melisma, the composer's idiolect, the style of the interpretation: in short, everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression... which forms the tissue of cultural values (the matter of acknowledged tastes, of fashions...)" (295). The *geno-song*, on the other hand, represents "the space where significations germinate "from within language and in its very materiality"; it forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression". It lies where the "melody really works at the language – not at what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sounds-signifiers, of its letters – where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work" (ibid.).

In his attempt to address *signifiante* in music, then, Barthes directs his focus away from the forms of communication and expressivity which rely on a cultural matrix. The "grain", he explains, allows us to "hear a body"; it is "the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue" (295): "the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs" (299). A voice which speaks directly on this level, "as though a single skin lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings", may in a sense become the music itself, and thus be recreated in the listener's body in a moment of blissful *jouissance*.

I will not pursue the project of finally establishing whether or not Kristin Asbjørnsen has a "grainy" voice. This is, as Barthes points out, certainly an individual evaluation which takes place as one listens to one's relation with the body of the man or woman singing (299). Nevertheless I mean that his notion of the "grain" offers some valuable perspectives to a reading of Asbjørnsen's vocal style. An interesting question would be whether one can "hear the body" in Asbjørnsen's voice. Reading Barthes, it seems that a singer who has the "grain" maintains this materiality, not sacrificing the sound of "the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose" (296) for the sake of clarity and communication. From this, one may easily infer that a raspy and unstylized voice has a "grainy" quality. However, Barthes makes sure to state that the "'grain" of the voice is not – or is not merely – its timbre" (297). He is aiming at *materiality* in both a physical and a metaphysical sense. To my judgment, Asbjørnsen definitely displays the materiality of her voice as body when she "takes hold of it" and sings with a focused presence (particularly in the mid-register). Her falsetto-like head-voice, on the other hand, connotes a sort of *immateriality*. What is more: with its rasping edge, its shifting character: now silently humming, now erupting in demonstrations of

pure strength, and its ability to crack open and fly along at its own will, she conveys an impression of sacrificing control, of giving away her power to shape and stylize. She seems to do this mostly in the service of communication and expressivity.

Anti-ornaments: the stylization of essence

The melisma, as Barthes implies, is a coded way of communicating through music which conveys both semantic and syntactic meaning. It makes sense both as shape (embodying a style), and as means of expressivity (embodying an emotion). Much like renaissance and baroque composers employed specific gestures to signal specific affects, one of my informants (see chapter 5) explained how he, growing up in a gospel choir, was socialized into employing specific *effects* to express specific *emotions*, and how this would again raise specific *responses* from his fellow singers in the congregation. Indeed, popular vocal styles deriving from African-American gospel and r&b traditions may be said to represent the *bel canto* of our times. With ubiquitous ornamentation, luscious flow and impressive timbre treatment, singers of contemporary r&b and soul demonstrate a technical control which is recognized as *virtuoso* by most listeners.

Again, Asbjørnsen's expression seems to place itself in the opposite corner of this landscape: she frequently allows her voice to float freely in an "un-phrased" manner, *letting go* of the voice as she *takes hold* of the expression. Her vibrato – somewhat uneven; sensitive but not conventionally pretty in terms of its shape – connotes expressive presence, but not stylistic self-consciousness. The form has surrendered to the content. This is no display of passivity but rather, I find, of artistic empowerment. Despite the free and "unshaped" character of her vocal gestures, however, Asbjørnsen's technique is fine-tuned and virtuous. The way she carries her phrases is not *easy* to manage, and hardly coincidental. Might perhaps this "lack of control" be approached as a stylistic, albeit unconscious, choice? She has technical superiority, but does not use it to please us by singing "beautifully" in a "pretty" sense. Instead she stains her timbre with cracks and distortion; effects which might technically be called *ornaments* of an aesthetics of resistance and displeasure; after all they are details and adornments which increase the expressivity of her song. One might regard such details as *anti-ornaments*. "Traditional" ornaments, however, are practically non-existent in her vocal style.

The vocal students in my focus group explained how they were compelled by their jazz vocals teachers to become conscious of how they employed certain effects, ornaments and other

deviations from the melody (such as an onset from below). These were mainly effects derived from a popular, soul-inspired African-American stylistic universe, and the students recognized them as typical of a “black” style. The message from the teachers seemed to be that unless the students had a “real meaning” behind using such effects, they should not use them, even though they came from a gospel background and were used to this idiom. In an interview, Kristin Asbjørnsen recalls that “back in the Ten Sing and gospel days [of her youth] it was all about liberating yourself from melody as soon as possible”. She describes a class situation very similar to my informants’ accounts. When she came to Ruth Reese, she was nineteen years old and accustomed to singing in Ten Sing choirs. Reese challenged her:

“She weeded out the “showing off tradition of singing”, and she was very much engaged in a search towards the core, she wanted to peel off the inconsequential. She confronted me all the time, and asked a lot of questions about why I sang this or that note”. (Asbjørnsen quoted by Johansen 2006)

It is interesting to note that while Morten in my focus group ascribed his teacher’s dislike of ornaments to an assumed lack of experience with black genres, Ruth Reese seemed to practice much the same rules¹¹⁷. She seems to have been somewhat in tune with these other song professors and jazz vocalists who professed a strong regard for communication and sincerity of expression and preferred to avoid shallow and purposeless embellishments.

If we suppose that there exists a kind of consensus among “serious” singers that an uncritical use of vocal effects makes it vulgar and stands in the way of honest communication, this seems to mostly apply to effects which are idiomatic of a “popular” (i.e. contemporary and “commercial”) style. The even vibrato at the end of the tone, the creak at the opening of a tone, hurriedly falling pentatonic passages, coded pitch deviations (sliding up from slightly below the pitch, etc) or traditional timbre treatment like belting at the top and airy in a lower register: these formal elements (however largely derived from African-American stylistic traditions) have become clichés of such a “popular” vocal practice. The “anti-ornaments”, on the other hand, seem to be embraced in genres with a higher status or legitimacy (by male singer/songwriters, rock vocalists, “alternative” and high-credibility female vocal artists such as PJ Harvey, Björk, and arguably Kristin Asbjørnsen). These “effects” are perhaps less stigmatizing because they are not perceived as such: the creak at the *end* of the tone, “unorganized” deviations from the pitch, timbre treatment such as distortion or cracking; such

¹¹⁷ According to Røsjø (2007), Reese was determined to communicate the spirituals material in terms of its strong message rather than its beautiful melodies, and she allegedly had a rather austere approach to ornamented decoration. Her stylistic preferences may have been influenced by her living and working in a European cultural environment for most of her professional life, but most importantly this example demonstrates that there are multiple aesthetic approaches to “black” vocal traditions – just like there are multiple ways of interpreting “white” music.

formal elements rather give the impression of having forced their way through *despite* of the singer's ability to shape the phrases. Rather than singing "too many notes", the performer appears to be singing "between the notes". The anti-ornaments have escaped him by pure necessity, and thus evade the categories of *empty gestures* and *purposeless play* which in chapter 4 were described as taboos in a Norwegian cultural environment. "Anti-ornaments" may quite contrarily be explained as formal details that are perceived as (or designed to communicate) *essence*.

Pheno-song and geno-song: cultural convention and universality

By its "un-shaped" character, Asbjørnsen's vocal behaviour never seems to be reduced to convention or cliché. She abstains from meeting the listener's expectations, and rather challenges the structures they are based upon. Like a scientist who discards her hypothesis, or a child playing with a recently discovered sound in her mouth, she demonstrates an innovative approach to vocal production instead of staying in the safe territory of well-known gestures. Her objective does not seem to be that of creating formal beauty or blessing the listener with a culturally affirmative experience of *plaisir*¹¹⁸. Rather, she seems to orient herself towards a less culturally contingent, less coded, and more universal expression – which might perhaps be addressed as the sphere of the *geno-song*.

Asbjørnsen's English pronunciation contributes to this impression. With thin l's, thick r's and strangely open vowels, she does not flaunt a skillfully perfected accent – nor does she appear to *attempt* using either an American or an English pronunciation. On the contrary, she seems to have found her own sounds, an accent displaced from geographical and social context which thus connotes a sort of universality¹¹⁹. Like in her musical phrasings, she does not surrender to cultural convention. Again, this invokes associations to the concept of *geno-song*, as "the space where significations germinate 'from within the language and in its very materiality'" (Barthes [1977](1990:295)). Such an approach to singing may also be seen in the light of western ideologies of art, indebted to the notion of *absolute music*: the impulse of erasing the social traces from language brings it closer to a universal and autonomous sound.

¹¹⁸ "Plaisir results, then, from the operation of the structures of signification through which the subject knows himself or herself; *jouissance* fractures these structures" (Middleton 1990:261). Middleton also observes "the Barthesian assumption that *jouissance* follows not repetition but the *subversion* of the code" (ibid.:287).

¹¹⁹ An interesting parallel can be found as Hawkins (2002; he also refers to Stringer 1992) discusses the politics of Northern English locality and Englishness in Morrissey's style, accent, and mannerism. Hawkins observes in Morrissey a "conscious evasion of sounding very local", but still asserts that "by employing a middle-class, educated accent, he does not deny his Northernness" (85). While Asbjørnsen, then, does not conceal her status as a non-native English speaker, and while she is perhaps marking a distance to American idioms (see ibid:101), I do not really find her accent to display notions of place.

And finally, this pronunciation connotes originality and sincerity: how, one might ask, can a Norwegian singer express herself truthfully if she does not display her originally foreign status towards the English language?

Several Norwegian vocalists who aspire to a legitimate or high-status field arguably demonstrate a similar approach to pronunciation, and when Oda in my focus group designed her vocal illustration of a “white” style, she did the same thing. This aesthetics’ relation to the “destabilized” field of Norwegian jazz (discussed in chapter 5) appears to be quite conspicuous. Is not a child’s natural curiosity, or an experimental search for truth and innovation, in fact implicit (and at times articulated) ideals for the practice within this community? And does not Asbjørnsen’s abstention from *beautification*, show off and imitation also somewhat correspond with the social codes explained by anthropologists as a typically Norwegian brand of secular pietism? In that case, then, one may still regard her performance as belonging to the *pheno-song* of a Norwegian contemporary vocal jazz expression, as it arguably relates to the phenomena which form “the tissue of cultural values (the matter of acknowledged tastes, of fashions, of critical commentaries), which takes its bearing directly on the ideological alibis of a period (“subjectivity,” “expressivity,” “dramaticism,” “personality,” of the artist)” (ibid.).

Summary

When Kristin Asbjørnsen was frequently suggested to me as an example of a Norwegian singer who signified on blackness, this was probably due to her choice of repertoire as well as the background narrative on how she came to discover it. Moreover, her arrangements and stage presentation seem to have picked up important influences in West-African traditions. However, her vocal style does not appear to resemble a “black” sound as this was described by my focus group – neither had I personally ever connected Asbjørnsen to the notion of a “black” expression. While my focus group’s descriptions of “vocal blackness” mainly referred to contemporary African-American soul and r&b, they approached the concept of “white vocal style” drawing on specific practices which they perceived as typical of a Norwegian jazz field. It seems that Asbjørnsen’s vocal style may be related, to some degree, to this last category. In my discussion I have suggested that Asbjørnsen displays an impulse to abstain from the explicit shaping of her vocal delivery; that she is not promoting “formal beauty” in accordance with obvious musical codes. Drawing on Barthes, I have conceptualized this impulse as a refusal to pursue *plaisir*. However, this impulse may also be

seen as a *stylistic* coding in accordance with *high art* ideals as well as Norwegian cultural ideals.

In the final part of this chapter I will examine another Norwegian vocalist who may be related to notions of black style, and who also seems to be influenced by the aesthetic and ideological climate of a Norwegian jazz scene. Still I perceive her to differ significantly from Asbjørnsen in her attitude to shaping a melody.

Torun Eriksen's "Glittercard"

"With a background in r&b, soul, and gospel, Torun Eriksen (26) brings a debut which in less than an hour establishes her as a voice to be reckoned with" (Mosnes, *Dagbladet*, 30 September, 2003).

"Torun Eriksen is not only an extraordinary jazz vocalist; she also possesses a remarkable ability to communicate (*formidlingsevne*) – which is brought to light through intricate and unpredictable melodies, and daring and thought-provoking lyrics" (Krogh, *VG* 7 February, 2006).

"Eriksen's voice is soulful and warm, and adds a perfect temperature to the experimental, often minimalist and cool (*kjølig*) musical backdrop" (*ibid.*).

"While many of the releases in this genre end up as overly skilful, soulless and slick, Torun Eriksen is vocalist with so big an authority and such a strong expression that she assumes her own identity" (Lundemo, *Adresseavisen* 14 March, 2006).

The story of Torun Eriksen's artistic development seems to share several features with Kristin Asbjørnsen's. Like Asbjørnsen she is a renowned, young, female singer and composer in the peripheral zones of jazz¹²⁰, who receives much acclaim for her characteristic voice and who communicates a strong consciousness about conveyance of meaning and honesty of expression. From a distance, her background also resembles that of Asbjørnsen somewhat. Growing up as active member of a gospel choir in a medium-sized Norwegian town, Eriksen had opportunity to develop as a soloist within this particular musical universe. As a grown teenager she started taking vocal lessons and explored a different repertoire such as jazz standards, and in the years that followed she would pursue a development towards finding her own, personal expression and rediscovering her voice¹²¹.

"I had a choir conductor who from early on gave me opportunities to express myself as a soloist. But back then it was mainly gospel, and I was trying to sound like I was black" (...) (Eriksen quoted by *Vesterålen Online* 12 July, 2006).

"Developing and discovering my own voice is something I will keep working on. It is an ongoing process. I have spent quite a lot of time getting to the point where I am now, where I start to know my own voice very well, and

¹²⁰ As *Dagbladet*'s critic articulated it: "Lavmælt knalldebut i utkanten av jazzlandet" (Mosnes 2003).

¹²¹ It is quite conspicuous how stories like this seem to run through my thesis. Oda and Morten from my focus group told similar accounts: having experienced freedom and vocal growth within a gospel environment, they became vocal students working towards a professional career within a "legitimate" musical field. Here they felt compelled (either by their own will or their teachers') to search for a more "sincere" expression – which meant developing away from what they had previously perceived as a "black" style. Erik Røe's statement in chapter 3 expresses a similar tendency. Asbjørnsen and Eriksen's accounts seem to be part of and thus confirm the pattern.

where I am able to accept how it sounds. I can dare to display it, and avoid forcing it. I no longer attempt to be different from what I am” (ibid.).

In interviews Eriksen communicates an affinity with the singer/songwriter tradition, emphasizing simplicity, lyrics and strong melodies. She does not seem eager to be categorized genre-wise. While her music is often described as lying in the borderland between jazz, pop, country, gospel, and soul, Eriksen expresses that she appreciates the musical freedom available to her within an open and overarching field of jazz (Aas 2006; Marcussen 2004). Her text delivery is remarkably nuanced and attentive, and listening to her two albums *Glittercard* (2003) and *Prayers & Observations* (2006) it seems that Eriksen’s vocal style becomes increasingly subdued, perhaps with the intention of allowing space for the words to come forth. The minimalist arrangements of her songs contribute to this sensitivity.

Her musical understatements notwithstanding, Eriksen’s *voice*, and her overall attitude to carrying a melody still seems to find its place within a soulful universe. The elements that immediately evoke associations to black vocal traditions may be the warm body of her timbre, her specific brand of vibrato, as well as a slight tendency to adorn the melody with ornaments and a certain attitude to pitch and time. Although Eriksen in her second album seems to have developed towards a somewhat more sober, non-vibrato style, I find that she still displays the same aesthetic sensibility or vocal *habitus*; a naturally incorporated sound and style which she takes with her. I shall try to get even closer to some of these features.

Soul in a countryside scenery

I have chosen to visit selected excerpts from a recording which may appear to be a slightly unorthodox setting for a “black” vocal aesthetics: a country tune in an album released on the Norwegian label Jazzland Recordings¹²². The title track “Glittercard” from Torun Eriksen’s debut album opens with a low-voiced backing band featuring a weeping steel guitar which continues to paint its thin lines straightly across the canvas of the tune. A patient pace is marked by the sleepy brushing of the snare on even eights, and the *Wurlitzer* keyboard sparingly fills in some of the many spaces left generously open in the musical texture with country fills, typically picking up the third from below. Against this hybrid country backdrop, the soft clarinet-like tone of Torun Eriksen’s vocals finds its place with a warm and soulful authority.

¹²² Jazzland Recordings (est. 1996) and its founder Bugge Wesseltoft have played an important role in promoting innovative Nordic jazz expressions such as NuJazz (with electronic and digital elements). Torun Eriksen is an artist in the Jazzland main label, the core of the enterprise, which in www.jazzlandrec.com is described as “an exciting frontier zone where elements from the acoustic and electronic merge to form new and exciting sounds”.

*Oh, how I wish I knew
What you are*

*Oh, how I wish I knew
What to say*

Eriksen's vocal timbre is rich, soft and airy, yet its safe placement in the full throat register gives it a solid core and a remarkably *grounded* quality which may be described as *body*. Remembering once more my focus group's description of a typically "black" timbre as *dark, hoarse, placed far at the back, that hollow sound*, Eriksen has clear affinities with these features. I perceive her timbre as displaying a straight-forward materiality¹²³ which is relaxing to listen to. Relaxing because it feels natural and un-manipulated, but also because it is pleasurable, and because I get the impression that the singer enjoys being in her own sound.

The richness of her timbre is partly achieved by use of a vibrato which expands the pitch-range of the tone. Imaginative and effective play with pitch is generally employed quite extensively by Eriksen, but it only reveals itself as one listens closely: bending the pitch slightly below (sometimes above) its central destination, Eriksen creates tension and relief through a subtle *in-between-ness*. With their constantly dynamic pitch, the notes assume a life, or a narrative, of their own.

Eriksen's vocal performance is also highly conscious in its play with time and rhythm, as she shifts between staying *on* or lagging *behind* the steady shuffling eights. Her rhythmic sensibility is emphasized by the use of language: despite the laidback and loosely flowing character of her melodic performance, she becomes a percussion instrument in her placing of consonants, particularly at the end of the words. The concise manner in which the consonants are pronounced, and the acoustic pattern formed by their placement, produce a rhythmically arousing effect. As Torun Eriksen sings, she shapes rhythm, pitch and timbre at a subtle but powerful level, perceptive to her musical surroundings. Albeit unplanned, nothing seems unshaped. Everything is made into music.

Miniature-ornaments and beautification

At first sound, "Glittercard" may not reveal any ornamentation and certainly no "vocal acrobatics". Listening closely, however, I perceive her song to be spangled with *miniature ornaments*: short phrases, even single words, are often adorned and shaped so as to become musical events in themselves. They may move over several pitches and feature rhythmical

¹²³ Barthes (1977;1989:296) takes issue with the singer who *conceals* the materiality of his voice, but may not also the sound of materiality (tongue, mucous membranes, glottis, etc) be added, i.e. consciously produced?

motives articulated by consonants or by the timing of pitch change; they feature vibrato and non-vibrato parts and effectful timbre inflection – all at a very detailed level.

In fact, the second (verse?) "*Oh, how I wish I knew*" in "Glittercard" may be described like an ornamented sequence¹²⁴. The glottal attack on "*Oh*" departs from the note below its central pitch, and ends by falling. The attack on *how* is also grounded slightly below the standard pitch, and the word is given emphasis by a short vibrato. After "*Oh, how I wish*" the second "*I*" arguably forms a miniature ornament in itself, as it slides from D natural to its central pitch, C natural, and then slides down to B natural in anticipation of the next word, *knew*. In the case of pitch change, the *sound of the transition* from one note to the other is also significant: the vocal technique most often employed to move diatonically across the scale in ornaments relies on highly trained, finely tuned and flexible vocal chords, and promotes an aesthetics of rapid and clearly defined pitch change which is recognizable even in a single shift from one pitch to another. The *slide* from one note to another offers a gesturally contrasting alternative in terms of pitch change.

In general, the ability to shape a vocal line at such a fine-grained level relies on a virtuoso vocal technique – but does not display this technique in an overt manner. However, as opposed to the *unshaped* character communicated by "anti-ornaments", the "miniature-ornaments" display a will to shape the melody right down to the most detailed level. In my opinion, these two modes of "ornamentation" thus signal fundamentally different attitudes to carrying a melody. The propensity to shape and beautify may be conceptualized as a feminine practice of adorning, as this was discussed in the previous chapter. Such an assumption suggests that the singer is somehow sacrificing her autonomy or integrity in order to please a beholding subject. However, I often find that the "beautifying" singer is not submitting herself to an objectifying gaze, but rather subjecting both herself and the participating listener to the laws of the music. And much of the pleasure of listening to Eriksen's performance is derived from the pleasure *she* seems to take in using the language to taste the different tone colors and timbres in her own voice. Simon Frith articulates a similar notion, invoking the agency of the body:

"One way in which we hear the body in the voice (...) is in the sheer physical pleasure of singing itself (...). One effect of such pleasure is that for many singers what they are singing, a word, is valued for its physical possibilities, what it allows the mouth or throat to do. The singer finds herself driven by the physical logic of the sound of the words rather than by the semantic

¹²⁴ Curiously enough, supporting Rischard's (2000;2004) observations regarding vocal etiquette, this elaborate shaping of the melody is featured only as the second verse repeats the melody. The first round offers a straighter, less emotionally expressive version.

meaning of the verse, and so creates a sense of spontaneity; the singing feels real rather than rehearsed; the singer is responding (like the listener) to the musical event of which they are part, being possessed by music rather than possessing it (Frith 1996:193).

Lyrics and language: the meanings of accent

The lyrics seem to constitute an important force in Torun Eriksen's musicianship and compositions. Her lyrical universe is not hard to enter. Often based on personal experiences, her *prayers* and *observations*¹²⁵ invite the listener to identification. Still, they abound in fine-tuned metaphors, displaying both sophisticated and effective composition and a musical sense of language. As mentioned above, Eriksen allows a careful communication of the words to assume a central position in her vocal delivery¹²⁶. But the language is also given an important function as *sound*. Eriksen's tendency to play with vowels is particularly salient in diphthongs on long notes. She seems to run through all possible tones of color on her way through the diphthong, in a sensate gesture close to *tasting*. Thus the words are also *made into music*, in a way which once again calls upon Barthes' description of the *voluptuousness of the sound-signifiers*. However, Eriksen does not achieve this by displacing the language from its social, geographical and cultural conditions like I argued was the case in Kristin Asbjørnsen's performance. On the contrary, I find Eriksen's accent and her sensuous exploitation of the words to associate her with an African-American stylistic traditions.

Elements in Eriksen's pronunciation which tend towards a Black American accent (with its southern retentions) may be the thick s tending towards /sh/, "when" tending towards /win/, and the flat and light vowel color in "that", tending towards /det/. The strong implications of socio-cultural background and ethnicity immediately signaled by accent have represented a great source of meaningful material for popular music to play with throughout the years.¹²⁷ Eriksen's choice and treatment of English sound-signifiers seem only natural in the stylistic landscape she roams, and her non-native freedom to shape her pronunciation is perhaps not as great as one might think. Her largely soulful vocal style to a certain extent *compels* her to incline towards a Black American accent. This is of course partly a result of the socio-historical roots of the style, but also a question of sound aesthetics. Simon Frith

¹²⁵ Eriksen's second album is titled *Prayers & Observations*.

¹²⁶ In fact, her strong focus on text communication makes her an adequate analytical example for applying Barthes' concept of the "grain of the voice": his essay addresses the "space of the encounter between a language and a voice" when the latter "is in a dual posture, a dual production – of language and of music" (294). For these purposes he uses the *lied* genre and the French *mélodie* as his empirical cases. Torun Eriksen's compositions as well as her vocal presentation are clearly indebted (through the singer/songwriter tradition) to these related genres.

¹²⁷ It would be interesting to see specific research on how English accents are employed in a Norwegian pop music context, considering the ostensible freedom with which non-native English speakers may choose and shape English accent.

(1996:176) observes that rock “sung in an upper-class English accent wouldn’t just sound unconvincing in terms of character, it also sounds wrong as noise”. My focus group supported this notion as they discussed whether the British soul singer Joss Stone might possibly perform her songs in a British accent. They quickly arrived at the conclusion that this was unthinkable. The choice of accent has important acoustic and aesthetic dimensions; sounds that we recognize as typical of black American accents are arguably a generic feature of a soul-inspired vocal idiom. One might suggest that the general *flow* of this idiom relies on accent: the unaspired¹²⁸ quality of the consonants in American English allows the vowels to flow through them in a smooth manner: instead of a puff of air following the letter *t* or *k*, the vowel is right there behind the tongue as it lets go of the palate, ready to fill the space with sound. The voice is constantly present.

Meno-song, black pheno-song, and embodiment

I have commented that rhythmic and sensuous use of consonants is salient in Eriksen’s performance; their function is clearly beyond simply being “the springboard for the admirable vowels” – which Roland Barthes explains as an indication of lack of *grain* in his before mentioned essay. On the contrary, Eriksen’s performance seems to celebrate the “voluptuousness of its sounds-signifiers, of its letters”, and listening to “Glittercard” we hear the constant presence of the singer all the way through the vowels, the consonants, even the breaths and absences. Recalling Geneva Smitherman’s (1977:122) observation concerning Black tonal semantics of how the “sound of what is being said is just as important as ‘sense’”, and Brackett’s (1995:122) argument on how James Brown “shows an extreme emphasis on the materiality of the signifier, [and] an almost complete lack of emphasis on the narrative”, Barthes’ essay on the *grain of the voice* seems to find an astonishing resonance within such an African-American aesthetic universe. Recalling how Barthes explains the *grain* as

“the space where significations germinate “from within language and in its very materiality”; it forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression” ([1977]1990:295),

Smitherman seems to make more or less the same point, almost echoing Barthes as she explains how the materiality and sounds of the language are important in the conveyance of meaning in *Black talk*:

¹²⁸ An aspirated consonant is (in the terminology of vocal phonetics) pronounced with an air leakage. In most English accents, consonants such as *k*, *t*, or *p* are aspirated (while in for example Spanish, these are unaspirated consonants). (Particularly Southern) American pronunciations seem to aspire the consonants to a lesser degree.

“The effect achieved is the conveyance of a psycho-cognitive message. These songified patterns of speech reach down to the “deep structure” of life, that common level of shared human experience which words alone cannot convey” (1977:135).

One could perhaps argue that the voluptuousness and *directly symbolic* function of the sound-signifiers that Barthes describes by invoking the concept of *geno-song* are in fact generic to the *pheno-song* of African-American style, as this is conceptualized by Smitherman and Brackett¹²⁹. Indeed, their statements seem to suggest that this style has already escaped the “tyranny of meaning”, or at least that the meanings conveyed by black stylistic performance do not depend solely on connotation. The sensuous experience of musical gestures and textures rather relies on the *embodied* experience of music. Middleton (1990:264) recognizes this when he states that “One of the importances of the Afro-American tradition lies in the fact that often the voice seems to be treated more as an ‘instrument’ (the body using its own resources to make sound) than as a soul borne on wings of song. (...) we hear vocal ‘personality’ receding as the voice is integrated into the processes of the articulating body”.

It is not straightforward to place Torun Eriksen’s vocal performance along an axis stretching from connotative communication, to an embodied and “directly symbolic” communication. If anything, I find her to attend quite carefully to both: without hearing the “vocal personality receding”, I am definitely drawn into an *embodied* listening experience of “Glittercard”. This experience results from what I have attempted to describe as Eriksen’s aptness to “beautify” by shaping musical gestures, for musical gestures are perceived and understood through the body. Her microscopic inflections of timbre, pitch and time form a musical matrix of playfulness into which the listener is easily absorbed. Eriksen’s conscious use of vibrato similarly compels the listener to immerse herself into, and participate in, the sound she produces. Scarcely different from bending the pitch slightly up and down, the slow frequency of the vibrative waves are carefully shaped or held back with great sensuousity¹³⁰. Eriksen never “lets go” of her vibrato, she is constantly *present* in the tone. The vibrato thus becomes yet another musical narrative; an event slowly unfolding before the listener who is pulled into an intimate relationship with the singer¹³¹ which may very well be called

¹²⁹ However, the syntactic meanings emerging from stylistic codes also pertain to the sphere of the *pheno-song*, as Barthes explains it. Thus it would be inappropriate to mix Barthes’ concept of the *geno-song* into the assessment of a style or genre.

¹³⁰ One might address this style of vibrato as idiomatic to microphone-era soul and r&b (as exemplified by D’Angelo or India Arie), and somewhat different from the gospel-derived vibrato which is *released* in a powerful stream (as exemplified by Whitney Houston, Donnie Hathaway and Gladys Knight).

¹³¹ Similarly, Bowman (2003:115) uses the term “playful voicedness” in his analysis of timbral play and dynamic use of vibrato and accentuation in Aretha Franklin’s version of “Try a Little Tenderness”. Bowman argues that Franklin’s constant unpredictability not only signals the emotional involvement of the performer, but keeps the listener “sonically off-balance” and demands his emotional engagement too.

jouissant: the experience of the limits around the subject disappearing¹³². Such an experience, however, is individually based, and one can really only refer to one's own experience: As for me, the first time a friend put on Torun Eriksen's record, I was actually on my way out of the room. But instantly upon hearing her voice I was virtually unable to move: my mind and body became so engaged in the singer's musical delivery, I became otherwise paralyzed and had to sit down for the rest of the song.

Gestural meaning at work

Middleton (1990:226) explains that "Musical emotions are specific; they take the form of basic musical structures – especially those drawing on kinetic and gestural patterns – which at the same time can be grasped cognitively". I have pointed to some of the most prominent musical gestures in Torun Eriksen's vocal performance style: little inflections of timbre and pitch, rhythmical placement of consonants, and a vibrato signaling strong presence. It would be interesting to see these gestures at work in a musical context and study how they may engage the listener by creating "musical emotions". I will therefore attempt to follow Eriksen's voice into the events leading to the musical climax of the song "Glittercard", which in my opinion is the first beat in the fifth bar of the chorus.

Put up that glittering card on the wall

And let me look at your love

In that shimmering rainbow of gold

The extraordinary sense of presence manifest in Eriksen's vibrato notwithstanding, much power lies in the absence of vibrato – the potential power of something that is not released. In the third and fourth bar of the chorus, the band attends to the business of building up musical tension. In addition to the bass letting go of the ground level for a moment in order to land at the crucial moment, Eriksen does an essential part of the job by holding back a vibrato (which according to the phrase and the length of the note might be expected) on the word "love" opening the fourth bar. That way, the note strives forward, and the tension continues to increase: as the melody ascends to the word "in" (whose rhythmical placement on the upbeat to the third beat is highly effectful), the unusually strained and sharp sound of Eriksen's vocal glissando echoes the bottleneck pulling the steel guitar string. Finally, in bar 5, tension is

¹³² Barthes describes how the *jouissant* pleasure from hearing the "grain" of the voice is an experience of loss (299), apparently indebted to a sense of Dionysian intoxication and "petite mort".

released: the melody reaches its highest pitch and catches up with the syncopation as the word “shimmering” is held back and allowed to start on the first beat.

Then, almost as soon as it started, the moment of pleasure is over. In the word “gold”, Eriksen abstains from vibrato and cuts the note a little short as the consonant *d* marks the first beat in the next bar. The word thus assumes a strong rhythmical function. The power of the note is enhanced additionally by pitch treatment: in a slight movement the note bends down towards the quarter tone below, and is then bent upwards but without ever reaching its standard pitch. This occurs in less than a quarter note; the listener is left with the impact of the event in retrospect, the memory of the abrupt and rhythmically potent note resonating in the friendly, calm space of a backing band mellow after climax.

Black vocal style in a Norwegian context: concluding remarks

“Within the black repertoire, *style* – which mainstream cultural critics often believe to be the mere husk, the wrapping, the sugar coating of the pill – has become *itself* the subject of what’s going on.”

Stuart Hall (1992:27)

In a stylistic landscape that does not exert caution and imaginatively handle effects such as vibrato in relation to musical expectation, the absence of vibrato would not carry the loaded meaning I described in the example above. Yet, the stylistic landscape that I have visited is dense in detail and gestural content. In his exploration of black talk, Roger D. Abrahams notes the black vernacular impulse to “perform by styling”, and explains that “*to stylize is to call attention to formal and formulaic features*” (according to Frith 1996:210), and Hall’s (1992) statement quoted above points to the same thing. Indeed, Eriksen’s vocal style shows a pleasure in stylizing the music. Remembering the discourse on black style as a “way of doing something” (see chapter 2) or as a certain stylistic sensibility (see chapter 4), one could say that Eriksen’s vocal performance somehow represents “black vocal style in a Norwegian context”: Despite her moderate use of ornamentation and careful text delivery, her performance also gives itself to be enjoyed in terms of its shapes. Of course, a tendency to “perform by styling” is in itself neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a vocal style to qualify as “black”, but certain approaches to stylizing may, when regarded in relation to other vocal aesthetics in certain Norwegian contexts, assume the quality of a “black” stylistic feature.

Kristin Asbjørnsen’s vocal style, as was discussed above, also seems to explore the materiality of the voice and all its different shades – but where Eriksen’s gestures often derive their power from their relation to formal features (in deviation of or accordance with musical expectation), the practice of shaping in Asbjørnsen’s case *ruptures* form rather than relate to it. The latter’s gestures are less patterned, and they often appear as random and uncontrolled consequences of affect and message rather than articulations of the laws of musical structure. I have proposed to consider this ostensible tendency to avoid stylizing as related to common notions of the specific features of a Norwegian cultural “way of being”: In the previous chapter, I discussed how surface (*pynt*, empty gestures) is often seen as obstructing content or “essence” in the Norwegian cultural climate. This has arguably fed an aesthetics of stylistic chastity, where *abstaining from beautification* is considered a great virtue. However, communicating a disregard of musical shape hardly saves space for more “essence”: it seems

inevitable that ornaments, miniature-ornaments, and anti-ornaments are all, at some level, *stylistic* performances of emotion and not essentially different as such. The perceived communication of a deeply meaningful, extra-musical message is an effect of the affinity produced in a listener who is confronted with a performance that articulates central social and aesthetic concerns through style (and in a Norwegian cultural context, anti-ornaments will perhaps be more successful to this end). In other words, extra-musical meanings emerge in the space between a performer and a listener within a specific context.

Through this thesis I have set forth the argument that vocal style signifies socially; that performing voices articulate cultural concerns. I have proposed the possibility of discussing vocal style in terms of their “black”, “white” or “Norwegian” characteristics, and explored how the negotiations over these terms may tell us something about the discursive construction of social realities. By presenting, and interpreting, subjective views of what a “black” or a “Norwegian” vocal style sounds like, I have been able not only to describe music, but also to explore some of the specificities and boundaries of a Norwegian context – and a Norwegian identity.

I have also proposed that the concepts of black (or white) vocal style are possible to approach as aesthetic universes, or *grooves*: patterned landscapes of sounds and gestures that communicate on a syntactic rather than a semantic level, and to which the body responds. Entering such a landscape may be a pleasurable experience, particularly when one has developed a certain stylistic sensibility through participation and performance: “[T]he most important lesson music still has to teach us is that its inner secrets and its ethnic rules can be taught and learned” (Gilroy 1993:109). We need to take great care not to underestimate the general exploitation and theft entailed by racial inequality. And, while we should not attempt to erase the cultural and historical legacies that inform the way we sing, it is musical participation that enables the boundaries of skin-color, cultural heritage, and place, to loose their fixity. In the end, these boundaries can be transcended by wayfaring voices and vocal vagabonds in the sounding universes of music.

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This thesis also includes some reworked material from my research essay "Blackness in Vocal Performance Style. A Discussion of relevant Approaches" which served as an exam for the MA course "Populærmusikkanalyse" in 2006. The credits from this course, however, do

not constitute a part of my MA degree (or any other university degree), and was taken on a voluntary basis on recommendation from my supervisor.

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